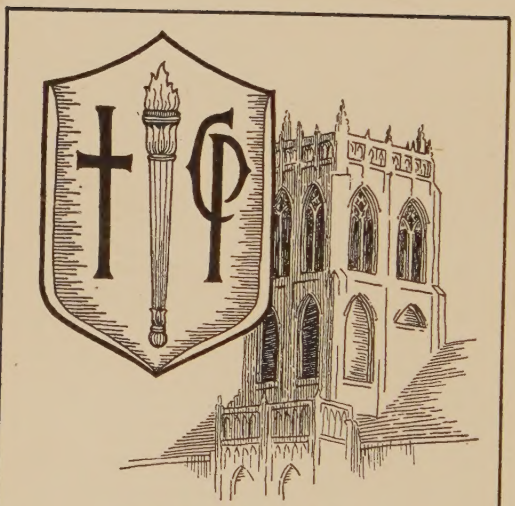

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ON THE EDGE

College of the Pacific
Stockton, Calif.

ON THE EDGE

SHORT STORIES

BY

WALTER DE LA MARE

WITH WOOD-ENGRAVINGS BY

ELIZABETH RIVERS

FABER & FABER LIMITED

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TO

FORREST REID

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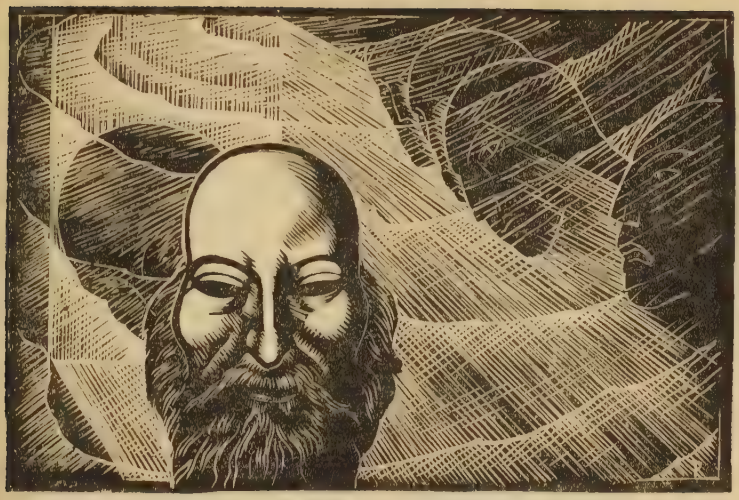
With one exception the stories in this volume have appeared serially during the past few years—in *Blackwood's Magazine*, *The Bookman's Journal*, *The Criterion*, *The London Mercury*—or in collections of short stories edited by Lady Cynthia Asquith. 'The Green Room' is also included in *Two Tales*, which was published in 1925 in a limited edition only.

As for 'An Ideal Craftsman'—this story was first printed in *The Monthly Review* in 1905, and has not merely, like the rest, been revised, but has been twice re-written: once by myself and once by my old friend Mr. Forrest Reid, who also went over it again in proof. If only I could—as gratefully—lay on him the responsibility for an equally generous and reviving share in the rest of the book!

W. D. L. M.



A RECLUSE

Which of the world's wiseacres, I wonder, was responsible for the aphorism that 'the best things in life are to be found at its edges'? It is too vague, of course. So much depends on what you mean by the 'best' and the 'edges'. And in any case most of us prefer the central. It has been explored; it is safe; you know where you are; it has been amply, copiously corroborated. But, 'Amusing? Well, hardly. Quite so!' as my friend Mr. Bloom would have said. But then, Mr. Bloom has now ventured over the 'borderline'. He is, I imagine, interested in edges no longer.

I have been reminded of him again—as if there were any need of it!—by an advertisement in *The Times*. It announces that his house, which he had himself renamed Montrésor, is for sale by auction—'This singularly charming freehold Residential Property . . . in all about thirty-eight acres . . . the Matured Pleasure Grounds of

unusual Beauty'. I don't deny it. But was it quite discreet to describe the house as *imposing*? A pair of slippers in my possession prompts this query. But how answer it? It is important in such matters to be clear and precise, and, alas, all that I can say about Mr. Bloom can be only vague and inconclusive. As, indeed, in some respects *he* was.

It was an afternoon towards the end of May—a Thursday. I had been to see a friend who, after a long illness, seemed now to be creeping back into the world again. We sat and talked for a while. Smiling, whispering, he lay propped up upon his pillows, gaunt and deathly, his eyes fixed on the green branches beyond his window, and that bleak hungry look on his face one knows so well. But when we fell silent, and his nurse looked covertly round the door and nodded her head at me, I rose with an almost indecent readiness, clasped his cold, damp, bony hand in mine, and said good-bye. 'You *look* miles better,' I assured him again and again.

It is a relief to leave a sick room—to breathe freely again after that fumy and stagnant atmosphere. The medicine bottles, the stuffiness, the hush, the dulcet optimism, the *gauche* self-consciousness. I even found myself softly whistling as I climbed back into my cosy two-seater again. A lime-tree bower her garage was: the flickering leafy evening sunshine gilded the dust on her bonnet. I released the brake; she leapt to life.

And what wonder? Flora and her nymphs might at any moment turn the corner of this sequestered country road. I felt adventurous. It would be miserably unenterprising to go back by the way I had come. I would just chance my way home.

Early evening is, with daybreak, May's most seductive hour; and how entrancing is any scene on earth after

even a fleeting glance into the valley of shadows—the sun-striped, looping, wild-flowered lanes, the buttercup hollows, the parsleyed nooks and dusky coppices, the amorous birds and butterflies. But nothing lovely can long endure. The sickly fragrance of the hawthorns hinted at that. Drowsy, lush, tepid, inexhaustible—an English evening.

And as I bowled idly on I overtook a horseman. So far as I can see he has nothing whatever to do with what came after—no more, at most, than my poor thin-nosed, gasping friend. I put him in only because he put himself in. And in an odd way too. For at first sight (and at a distance) I had mistaken the creature for a bird—a large, strange, ungainly bird. It was the cardboard box he was carrying accounted for that.

Many shades lighter than his clothes and his horse, it lay on his back cornerwise, suspended about his neck with a piece of cord. As he trotted along he bumped in the saddle, and his box bumped too. Meanwhile, odd mechanical creature, he beat time to these bumpings on his animal's shoulder-blade with the little leafy switch poised between his fingers. I glanced up into his face as I passed him—a greyish, hairy, indefinite face, like a miller's. To mistake a cardboard box for a bird! He amused me. I burst out laughing; never dreaming but that he was gone for ever.

Two or three miles further on, after passing a huddle of tumbledown cottages and a duck-pond, I caught my first glimpse of Mr. Bloom's house—of Montrésor. And I defy anybody with eyes in his head to pass that house unheeded. The mere quiet diffident looks of it brought me instantly to a standstill. 'Imposing'!

And as I sat on, looking in on it through its high wrought-iron gates, I heard presently the hollow thump

of a horse's hoofs in the muffling dust behind me. Even before I glanced over my shoulder, I knew what I should see—my man on horseback. These narrow lanes—he must have taken a short cut.

> There rode a Miller on a horse,
> A jake on a jackass could do no worse—
> *With a Hey, and a Hey, lollie, lo!*
> Meal on his chops and his whiskers too—
> The devil sowed tares, where the tare-crop grew—
> *With a Hey, and a Hey, lollie, lo!*

Up he bumped, down he bumped, and his leafy switch kept time. When he drew level, I twisted my head and yelled up at him a question about the house. He never so much as paused. He merely lowered that indiscriminately hairy face of his a few inches nearer me, opened his mouth, and flung up his hand with the switch. Perhaps the poor fellow was dumb; his raw-boned horse had coughed, as if in sympathy. But, dumb or not, his gesture had clearly intimated—though with unnecessary emphasis—that Montrésor wasn't worth asking questions about, that I had better 'move on'. And, naturally, it increased my interest. I watched him out of sight. Why, as I say, I have mentioned him I scarcely know, except that for an instant there he was, at those gates—Mr. Bloom's—gates from which Mr. Bloom himself was so soon to depart. When he was completely gone and the dust of him had settled I turned to enjoy another look at the house—a protracted look too.

To all appearance it was vacant; but if so, it could not have been vacant long. The drive was sadly in need of weeding; though the lawns had been recently mown. High-grown forest trees towered round about it, overtopping its roof—chiefly chestnuts, their massive lower branches drooping so close to the turf they almost

brushed its surface. They were festooned from crown to root with branching candelabra-like spikes of blossom. Now it was daylight; but imagine them on a still, pitch-black night, their every twig upholding a tiny, phosphoric cluster of tapers!

Not that Montrésor (or rather what of its façade was in view) was an old or even in itself a very beautiful house. It must have been built about 1750 and at second sight was merely of pleasing proportions. And then one looked again, and it looked back—with a furtive reticence as if it were withholding itself from any direct scrutiny behind its widespread blossoming chestnut trees. 'We could if we would', said its windows, as do certain human faces; though no doubt the queer gesture and the queerer looks of my cardboard-boxed gentleman on horseback accounted for something of its effects.

A thin haze of cloud had spread over the sky, paling its blue. The sun had set. And a diffused light hung over walls and roof. It suited the house—as powder may suit a pale face. Even nature appeared to be condoning these artifices—the hollow lawns, the honeyed azaleas.

How absurd are one's little hesitations. All this while I had been debating whether to approach nearer on foot or to drive boldly in. I chose the second alternative, with the faint notion in my mind perhaps that it would ensure me, if necessary, a speedier retreat. But then, premonitions are apt to display themselves a little clearer in retrospect! Anyhow, if I had *walked* up to the house, that night would not have been spent with Mr. Bloom. But no, the house looked harmless enough, and untenanted. I pushed open the gates and, gliding gently in under the spreading chestnut trees towards the entrance, again came to a standstill.

A wide, low, *porte-cochère* supported by slender stone

columns, sheltered the beautiful doorway. The metal-work of its fanlight, like that of the gates, was adorned with the device of a pelican feeding her young. The owner's crest, no doubt. But in spite of the simplicity of the porch, it was not in keeping, and may have been a later addition to the house. Its hollow echoings stilled, I sat on in the car, idly surveying the scene around me, and almost without conscious thought of it. What state of mind can be more serene—or more active?

No notice whatever seemed to have been taken of my intrusion. Silence, silence remained. Indeed, in spite of the abundant cover around me, there was curiously little bird-song—only a far-away thrush calling faintly, 'Ahoy! ahoy! ahoy! Come to tea! Come to tea!' And after all it was the merry month of May, and still early. But near at hand, not even a wren shrilled. So presently I got out of the car, and mooned off to the end of the shallow, stone-vased terrace, stepping deliberately from tuft to tuft of grass and moss. Only a dense shrubbery beyond: yew, ilex, holly; a dampish winding walk. But on this —the western aspect of the house—there showed faded blinds to the windows, and curtains too—bleached by numberless sunsets, but still rich and pleasant in colour.

What few live things may have spied out the intruder had instantly withdrawn. I sighed, and turned away. The forsaken pierces quicker to the heart than by way of the mind. My green-winged car looked oddly out of place—even a little homesick—under the porch. She was as grey with dust as were my odd horseman's whiskers. I had come to the conclusion—quite wrongly—that for the time being, at least, the place *was* unoccupied; though possibly at any moment caretaker or housekeeper might appear.

Indeed, my foot was actually on the step of the car,

when, as if at a definite summons, I turned my head and discovered not only that the door was now open, but that a figure—Mr. Bloom's—was standing a pace or so beyond the threshold, his regard steadily fixed on me. Mr. Bloom—a memorable figure. He must have been well over six feet in height, but he carried his heavy head and heavy shoulders with a pronounced stoop. He was both stout and fat, and yet his clothes now hung loosely upon him, as if made to old measurements—a wide, black morning-coat and waistcoat, and brown cloth trousers. I noticed in particular his elegant boots. They were adorned with what I had supposed was an obsolete device—imitation laces. A well-cut pair of boots, none the less, by a good maker. His head was bald on the crown above a fine lofty forehead—but it wore a superfluity of side hair, and his face was bushily bearded. With chin drawn up a little, he was surveying me from under very powerful magnifying spectacles, his left hand resting on the inside handle of the door.

He had taken me so much by surprise that for the moment I was speechless. We merely looked at one another; he, with a more easily justifiable intentness than I. He seemed, as the saying goes, to be sizing me up; to be fitting me in; and it was *his* voice that at length set the porch echoing again—a voice, as might have been inferred from the look of him, sonorous but muffled, as if his beard interfered with its resonance.

'I see you are interested in the appearance of my house,' he was saying.

The greeting was courteous enough; and yet extraordinarily impersonal. I made the lamest apologies, adding some trivial comment on the picturesqueness of the scene, and the general 'evening effects'. But of this I am certain; the one thing uppermost in my mind, even at

this stage in our brief acquaintance, was the desire not to continue it. Mr. Bloom had somehow exhausted my interest in his house. I wanted to shake him off, to go away. He was an empty-looking man in spite of his domed brow. If his house had suggested vacancy, so did he; and yet—I wonder.

Far from countenancing this inclination, however, he was inviting me not to leave him. He was welcoming the interloper. With a slow comprehensive glance to left and right, he actually stepped out at last under the porch, and—with a peculiar tentative gesture—thrust out a well-kept, fleshy hand in my direction, as if with the intention of putting me entirely at my ease. He then stood solemnly scrutinizing my tiny car, which, with him as solitary passenger, would appear more like a perambulator!

At a loss for any alternative, I withdrew a pace or so, and took another long look at the façade—the blank windows, their red-brick mouldings, the peeping chimney-stacks, the quiet, serene sufficiency of it all. There was, I remember, a sorry little array of half-made, abandoned martins' nests plastered up under the narrow jutting of the roof. But this craning attitude was fatiguing, and I turned and looked back at Mr. Bloom.

Mr. Bloom apparently had not stirred. Thus inert, he resembled the provincial statue of some forgotten Victorian notability—his feet set close together in those neat, polished, indoor boots, his fat fingers on his watch-chain. And now he seemed to be smiling at me out of his bluish-grey, rather prominent eyes, from under those thick distorting glasses. He was suggesting that I should come in, an invitation innocent of warmth, but more pressing than the mere words implied. To a mouse the wreathing odour of toasted cheese—before the

actual trap comes into sight—must be similar in effect. There was a suppressed eagerness in the eyes behind those glasses. They had rolled a little in their sockets. And yet, even so, why should I have distrusted him? It would be monstrous to take this world solely on its face value. I was on the point of blurting out a churlish refusal when he stepped back and pushed the door open. The glimpse within decided me.

For the hall beyond that hospitable gape was peculiarly attractive. Not very lofty, but of admirable proportions, it was panelled in light wood, the carving on its cornice and pilasters tinged in here and there with gilt. From its roof hung three chandeliers of greenish-grey glass—entrancing things, resembling that mysterious exquisite ice that comes from Waterford. The evening light swam softly in through the uncurtained windows as if upon the stillness of a dream.

Empty, it would have been a fascinating room; but just now it was grotesquely packed with old furniture—beautiful, costly things in themselves, but, in this hugger-mugger, robbed of all elegance and grace. Only the narrowest alley-way had been left unoccupied—an alley-way hardly wide enough to enable a human being to come and go without positively mounting up off the floor, as in the Land-and-Water game beloved of children. It might have been some antique furniture dealer's interior, prepared for 'a moonlight flit'. Mr. Bloom smiled at the air of surprise which must have been evident in my face. 'Here to-day', he murmured, as if he were there and then preparing to be off—'and gone to-morrow.'

But having thus enticed me in under his roof, he rapidly motioned me on, not even turning his head to see if I were following him. For so cumbersome a man he was agile, and at the dusky twist of the corridor I found

him already awaiting me, his hand on an inner door. 'This is the library,' he informed me, with a suavity that suggested that I was some wealthy visitor to whom he wished to dispose of the property. 'One moment,' he added hurriedly, 'I think I neglected to shut the outer door.'

A library is often in effect little better than a mausoleum. But on a sunny morning this room must have looked as jocund as some 'beauty's' boudoir. It was evening now. Dimmed old Persian rugs lay on the floor; there was a large writing-table. The immense arm-chairs were covered with vermilion morocco leather, and the walls, apart from a few engravings and mezzotints, were lined with exquisitely bound books, and jade and geranium and primrose-yellow were apparently Mr. Bloom's favourite colours. On one side many of the books had been removed and lay stacked up in portable bundles beneath the shelves on which they had stood. Opposite these was a lofty chimney-piece surmounted by mouldings in plaster—some pagan scene. And once again the self-sacrificing pelican showed in the midmost panel—still engaged in feeding her young.

I was looking out of the long windows when Mr. Bloom reappeared. He still seemed to be smiling in his non-committal fashion and treated me to yet another slow scrutiny; the most conspicuous feature of his person, apart from his spectacles, being at such moments the spade-guinea that dangled from his watch-chain. Brown trousers, my friend, I was thinking to myself, why brown? And why not wear clothes that fit?

'You are a lover of books?' he was murmuring, in that flat, muffled voice of his; and we were soon conversing amiably enough on the diversions of literature. He led me steadily from shelf to shelf; but for the time being he

was only making conversation. He was definitely detaining me, and staved off every opportunity I attempted to seize of extricating myself from his company. At last I bluntly held out my hand, and in spite of his protestations—so insistent that he began stuttering—I made my way out of the room.

Daylight was failing now, and the spectacle of that hoard of furniture in the gloaming was oddly depressing. Mr. Bloom had followed me out, cooing, as he came on, his apologies and regrets that I could spare him no more time—'The upper rooms . . . the garden . . . my china.' I persisted, nevertheless, and myself opened the outer door. And there in the twilight, with as disconsolate an appearance as a cocker-spaniel that has wearied of waiting for its mistress, sat my car.

I had actually taken my seat in it—having omitted to shake hands with Mr. Bloom—when I noticed that in a moment of absent-mindedness I must not only have locked the gears but that the Yale gear-key which usually lay in the little recess to the left of the dash-board was missing. Accidents of this kind may be absurdly disconcerting. I searched my pockets; leapt out and searched them again; and not only in vain, but without the faintest recollection in my mind of having even touched the key. It was a ridiculous, a mortifying situation. With eyes fixed, in an effort to recall my every movement, I gazed out over the wide green turf beneath the motionless chestnut trees, and then at last turned again, and looked at Mr. Bloom.

With plump hands held loosely and helplessly a little in front of him, and head on one side, he was watching my efforts with an almost paternal concern.

'I have mislaid the key,' I almost shouted at him, as if he were hard of hearing.

'Is it anything of importance? Can I get you anything? Water? A little grease?'

That one word, grease, was accompanied with so ridiculous a trill that I lost patience.

'It's the gear-key,' I snapped at him. 'She's fixed, immovable, useless! I wish to heaven I . . .' I stopped aimlessly, fretfully searching the porch and the turf beyond it. Mr. Bloom watched me with the solicitude of a mother. 'I ought to have been home an hour ago,' I stuttered over my shoulder.

'Most vexatious! Dear me! I am distressed. But my memory too. . . . A Slough of Despond. Do you think by any chance, Mr. Dash, you can have put the key into your *pocket*?'

I stared at him. The suggestion was little short of imbecile; and yet he had evidently had the sagacity to look for my name on my licence! 'What is the nearest town?' I all but shouted.

'The nearest,' he echoed; 'ah, the nearest! Now, let me see! The nearest *town*—garage, of course. A nice question. Come in again. We must get a map; yes, a map, don't you think? That will be our best course; an excellent plan.'

I thrust my hand into the leather pocket of the car, and produced my own. But only the eyes of an owl could have read its lettering in that light, and somehow, it did not occur to me in this tranquil dusky scene to switch on the lamps. There was no alternative. I followed Mr. Bloom into the house again, and on into his study. He lit a couple of candles and we sat down together at the writing-table and examined the map. It was the closest I ever got to him.

The position was ludicrous. Montrésor was a good four miles from the nearest village of any size and seven

from the nearest railway station—and that on a branch line. And here was this recluse peppering me with futile advice and offers of assistance, and yet obviously beaming with satisfaction at the dilemma I was in. There was not even a servant in the house to take a telegram to the village—if a telegram had been of the slightest use. I hastily folded up my map—folded it up wrong, of course—and sat glooming. He was breathing a little rapidly after this exercise of intelligence.

'But why be disturbed?' he entreated me. 'Why? A misadventure; but of no importance. Indeed not. You will give me the pleasure of being my guest for the night—nothing but a happiness, I assure you. Say no more. It won't incommode me in the slightest degree. This old house . . . A most unfortunate accident. They should make larger, heavier keys. Ridiculous! But then I am no mechanic.'

He stooped round at me—the loose, copious creature—and was almost flirtatious. 'Frankly, my dear young sir, I cannot regret an accident that promises me more of your company. We bookish people, you understand.'

I protested, stood up, and once more began searching my pockets! His head jerked back into its habitual posture.

'Ah! I see what is in your mind. Think nothing of it. Yes, yes, yes. Comforts, convenience curtailed, I agree. But my good housekeeper always prepares a meal sufficient for two—mere habit, Mr. Dash, almost animal habit. And besides—why not? I will forage for myself. A meal miscellaneous, perhaps, but not unsatisfying.' He beamed. 'Why not take a look at the garden meanwhile before it is dark?' The tones had fallen still flatter, the face had become impassive.

I was cornered. It was useless to protest—it would

have been atrociously uncivil. He himself thrust open the windows for me. Fuming within, I stumped out on to the terrace while he went off to 'forage'. I saw in fancy those thick spectacles eyeing the broken meats in the great larder. What was wrong with the man? What made him so extortionately substantial, and yet in effect, so elusive and unreal? What indeed constitutes the *reality* of any fellow creature? The something, the someone within, surely; not the mere physical frame.

In Mr. Bloom's company that physical frame seemed to be mainly a kind of stalking horse. If so, the fowler was exquisitely intent on not alarming his prey. Those honeyed decoy-notes. But then, what conceivably could he want with *me*? Whom had he been waiting for, skulking there at some convenient window? Why was he alone in this great house? Only Mr. Bloom could answer these questions: and owing to some odd scruple of manners or what-not, I couldn't put them to him. Ridiculous!

My mind by this time had wearied of these vexations and had begun to follow my eyes. I was looking southward—a clear lustre as of glass was in the heavens. It had been a calm but almost colourless sunset, and westward the evening star floated like a morsel of silver in a dove-grey fleece of cloud drawn gently across the fading blue of the horizon. The countryside lay duskily purple and saturnine, and about a hundred yards away in this direction was a wide stretch of water—dead-white under the sky—a lake that must have been thronged with wild-fowl; yet not so much as a peewit crying.

In front of me the garden was densely walled in with trees, and an exceedingly skilful topiarian had been at work on the nearer yews. Year after year he must have been clipping his birds and arches and vast mushrooms and even an obelisk. They were now in their freshest

green. Mr. Bloom's servants cannot have forsaken him in a batch. They were gone, though. Not a light showed in the dusk; no movement; no sound except out of the far distance, presently, the faint hypnotic *churring* of a night-jar. It is the bird of woody solitude. Well, there would be something of a moon that night, I knew. She would charm out the owls, and should at least ensure me a lullaby. But why this distaste, this sense of inward disquietude?

And suddenly I wheeled about at the sound, as I thought, of a footstep. But no; I was alone. Mr. Bloom must still be busy foraging in his back-quarters or his cellarage. And yet—is it credible?—once more in a last forlorn hope I began to search my pockets for the missing key! But this time Mr. Bloom interrupted the operation. He came out sleeking his hands together in front of him and looking as amiably hospitable as a churchwarden at a parochial soirée. He led me in, volubly explaining the while that since he had been alone in the house he had all but given up the use of the upper rooms. 'As a matter of fact, I am preparing to leave', he told me, 'as soon as it is—convenient. Meanwhile I camp on the ground-floor. There is many a novelty in the ordinary routine of life, Mr. Dash, that we seldom enjoy. It amused my secretary, this system of picnicking, poor fellow—at least for a while.'

He came to a standstill on the threshold of the room into which he was leading me. A cluster of candles burned on the long oak table set out for our evening meal, but otherwise the room—larger than the study, and containing, apart from its cabinets of china and old ivory, almost as many books—was thickly curtained, and in gloom.

'I must explain', he was saying, and he laid the four

fingers of his left hand very gently on my shoulder, 'that my secretary has left me. He has left me for good. He is dead.' With owl-like solemnity he scrutinized the blank face I turned on him, as if he were expectant of sympathy. But I had none to give. You cannot even feign sympathy without *some* preparation.

Mr. Bloom glanced over his shoulder into the corridor behind us. 'He has been a great loss,' he added. 'I miss him. On the other hand,' he added more cheerfully, 'we mustn't allow our personal feelings to interfere with the enjoyment of what I am afraid even at best is a lamentably modest little meal.'

Again Mr. Bloom was showing himself incapable of facing facts. It was by no means a modest little meal. Our cold *bouillon* was followed by a pair of spring chickens, the white sauce on their delicate breasts adorned in a chaste design with fragments of cucumber, truffle and mushroom—hapless birds that seemed to have been fattened on cowslips and honeysuckle buds. There was an asparagus salad, so cold to the tongue as to suggest ice; and neighbouring it were old silver dishes of meringues and an amber-coloured wine jelly, thickly clotted with cream. After the sherry champagne was our only wine; and it was solely owing to my abstemiousness that we failed to finish the second bottle.

Between mouthfuls Mr. Bloom indulged in general conversation—of the exclamatory order. It covered a pretty wide autobiographical field. He told me of his boyhood in Montrésor. The estate had been in his family for close on two centuries. For some years he had shared it with the last of his three sisters—all now dead.

'She's there!' he exclaimed, pointing an instant with uplifted fork at a portrait that hung to the right of the chimney-piece. 'And that's my mother.' I glanced up at

Miss Bloom; but she was looking in the other direction, and our real and painted eyes did not meet. It seemed incredible that these two could ever have been children, have played together, giggled, quarrelled, made it up. Even if I could imagine the extinguished lady in the portrait as a little girl, no feat of fancy could convert Mr. Bloom into a small boy—a sufferable one, I mean.

By the time I had given up the attempt, and, having abandoned the jelly, we had set to work on some Camembert cheese, Mr. Bloom's remarks about his secretary had become almost aggrieved.

'He was of indispensable use to me in my literary work,' he insisted as he chawed rapidly on, 'modest enough in itself—I won't trouble you with that—only an obscure by-way of interest. Indis*pens*able. We differed in our views, of course: no human beings ever see perfectly eye to eye on such a topic. . . . In a word, the occult. But he had an unusual *flair* of which he himself, you will hardly believe it, until he came to me, was completely ignorant.' He laid his left hand on the table. 'I am not denying that for one moment. We succeeded in attaining the most curious and interesting results from our little experiments. I could astonish you.'

I tried in vain to welcome the suggestion; but the light even of only six candles is a little stupefying when one has to gaze through them at one's host, and Mr. Bloom was sitting up immediately opposite to me on the other side of the table.

'My own personal view', he explained, 'is that his ill-health was in no way due to these investigations. It was, I assure you, against my wish that he should continue them even on his own account. Flatly, two heads, two wills, two cautions even, are better than one in such matters. Dr. Ponsonby—I should explain that Dr. Pon-

sonby is my medical adviser; he attended my poor sister in her last illness—Dr. Ponsonby, unfortunately, lives at some little distance, but he did not hesitate to sacrifice all the time he could spare. On the other hand, as far as I can gather, he was not in the least surprised that when the end came, it came suddenly. My secretary, Mr. Dash, was found dead in his bed—that is, in his bedroom. Speaking for myself, I should——' back went his head again, and once more his slightly bolting eyes gazed out at me like polished agates across the silvery lustre of the candlelight—'speaking for myself,' his voice had muffled itself almost into the inarticulate beneath his beard, 'I should prefer to go quickly when I have to go at all.'

The white plump hand replenished his glass with champagne. 'Not that I intend to imply that I have any immediate desire for that. While as for you, my dear young sir,' he added almost merrily, 'having enjoyed only a morsel of my experience in this world, you must desire that consummation even less.'

'You mean, to die, Mr. Bloom?' I put it to him. His chin lowered itself into his collar again; the eyelids descended over his eyes.

'Precisely. Though it is as well to remember there is more than one way of dying. There is first the body to be taken into account; and there is next—what remains: though nowadays, of course—well, I leave it to you.'

Mr. Bloom was a peculiar conversationalist. Like an astute letter-writer he ignored questions in which he was not interested, or which he had no wish to answer; and with the agility of a chimpanzee in its native wilds would swing off from a topic not to his liking to another that up to that point had not even been hinted at. Quite early in our extravagantly *tête-à-tête* meal I began to suspect that

the secret of his welcome to a visitor who had involuntarily descended on him from out of the blue, was an insensate desire to hear himself talk. His vanity was elephantine. Events proved this surmise to be true only in part. But in the meantime it became pretty evident why Mr. Bloom should be in want of company; I mean of ordinary human company, though he seemed to have wearied of his secretary's some little time before that secretary had been summoned away.

'You will agree, my dear sir, that to see eye to eye with an invalid for any protracted period is a severe strain. Illness breeds fancies, not all of them considerate. Not a happy youth, *ever*: introspective—an 'introvert' in the cant term of our time. But still meaning well; and, oh yes, endeavouring not to give way when—when in company. My sister never really liked him, either. Not at all. But then, she was the prey of conventions that are yet for some, perhaps, a safeguard. *We* shared the same interests, of course—he and I. Our arrangement was based on that. He had his own views, but was at times, oh yes'—he filled his glass again—'exceedingly obstinate about them. He had little *staying* power. He began to fumble, to hesitate, to question, to fluster himself—and me, too, for that matter—at the very moment perhaps when we were arriving at an excessively interesting juncture.

'You know the general process, of course?' He had glanced up over his food at me, but not in order to listen to any answer I might have given. 'It is this'—and he forthwith embarked on a long and tedious discourse concerning the sweet uses of the planchette, of automatic writing, table-rapping, the hidden slate, ectoplasm, and all the other—to me rather disagreeable—paraphernalia of the spiritualistic *séance*. Nothing I could say or do,

not even unconcealed and deliberate yawning, had the least effect upon Mr. Bloom's fluency. 'Lung trouble' appeared to have been the primary cause of his secretary's final resignation. But if the unfortunate young man had night after night been submitted to the experience that I was now enduring, exasperation and boredom alone would have accounted for it. How on earth indeed, I asked myself, could he have endured Mr. Bloom so long.

I ceased to listen. The cascade of talk suddenly came to an end. Mr. Bloom laid his hands on either side of his dessert plate and once more fixed me in silence under his glasses. 'You, yourself, have possibly dabbled a little in my hobby?' he enquired.

I had indeed. In my young days my family had possessed an elderly female friend—a Miss Algood. She had been one of my mother's bridesmaids, and it was an unwritten law in our household that all possible consideration and affection should be shown to her in all circumstances. She, poor soul, had come down in the world—until indeed she had come down at last to one small room on the top floor in lodgings in Westbourne Park. She was gaunt, loquacious, and affectionate; and she had a consuming interest in the other world. I hear her now: 'On the other side, my dear Charles.' 'Another plane, Charles.' 'When I myself pass over.' It is curious; she was absolutely fearless and quixotically independent.

For old sake's sake, and I am afraid for very little else, I used to go to tea with her occasionally. And we would sit together, the heat welling up out of the sun-struck street outside her window; and she would bring out the hateful little round Victorian table, and the wine-glass and the cardboard alphabet; and we would ask questions of the unseen, the mischievous and the half-crazy concern-

ing the unknowable; and she would become flushed and excited, her lean hands trembling, while she urged me now to empty my mind, and now, to concentrate! And though I can honestly say I never deliberately tampered with that execrable little wine-glass in its wanderings over the varnished table; and though she herself never, so far as I could detect, deliberately cooked the messages it spelt out for us; we enjoyed astonishing revelations. Revelations such as an intelligent monkey or parrot might invent—yet which by any practical test proved utterly valueless.

These 'spiritistic' answers to our cross-examination were at the same time so unintelligibly intelligent, and yet so useless and futile, that I had been cured once and for all of the faintest interest in 'the other side'—thus disclosed I mean. If anything, in fact, the experience had even a little tarnished the side Mr. Bloom now shared with me.

For this reason alone his first mention of the subject had almost completely taken away my appetite for his chicken, his jelly and his champagne. After all, that 'other side's' border-line from which, according to the poet, no traveller returns, must be a good many miles longer even than the wall of China, and not *all* its gates can lead to plains of peace or paradise or even of mere human endurableness.

I explained at last to Mr. Bloom that my interest in spiritualism was of the tepidest variety. Alas, his prominent stone-blue eyes—lit up as they were by this concentrated candlelight—incited me to be more emphatic than I intended. I told him I detested the whole subject. 'I am convinced', I assured him, 'that if the messages, communications, whatever you like to call them, that you get that way are anything else than the babblings

and mumblings of sub-consciousness—a deadly dubious term, in itself—then they are probably the work of something or somebody even more "sub" than that.'

Convinced! I knew, of course, practically nothing at first hand about the subject—Miss Algood, poor soul, was only the fussiest and flimsiest of amateurs—but ignorance, with a glimmer of intuition, perhaps gives one assurance. 'Whatever I have heard', I told him flatly, 'from *that* source—of the future, I mean, which awaits us when we get out of this body of ours, Mr. Bloom, fills me with nothing but regret that this life is not the end of everything. I don't say that you get *no*where, even by that route, and I don't say that you mayn't get further some day than you intend, but', I stupidly blustered on, 'my own personal opinion is that the whole business, so conducted, is a silly and dangerous waste of time.'

His eyes never wavered, he lowered his head by not so much as the fraction of an inch, and then, as if in an aside, his lips hardly stirring, he ejaculated 'Quite so, but not exactly *no*where, it may be.'

And then, as I sat looking at him—it is difficult to put it into words—his face 'went out' so to speak; it became a face (not only abandoned but) forsaken, vacant, and as if uncurtained too, bleak and mute as a window. The unspeculating eyes remained open, one inert hand lay on the table beside his plate, but he, Mr. Bloom, was gone. And for perhaps two minutes I myself sat on there, in the still clear candlelight of that festal board, in a solitude I do not covet to experience again. Yet—as I realized even then—Mr. Bloom had succeeded in this miserable manœuvre merely by a trick. The next instant his bluish eyes became occupied, his face took life, and he once again looked out at me with a leer of triumph, an almost coquettish vanity, though he blinked a little as if the

light offended him, and as if he were trying to conceal the fact that he had not much appreciated the scene or state which he had come *from*.

He gave me no time to reflect on this piece of buffoonery. 'So, so,' he was informing me, 'shutters up or shutters down, we are what we are; and all that you have been saying, my dear Mr. Dash, amuses me. Extraordinary! Most amusing! Illuminating! Quite so! Quite so! Capital! You tell me that you know nothing about the subject. Precisely. And that it is silly and dangerous. Ah, yes! And why not? Dangerous! Well, one word in your ear. Here, my dear sir, we are in the very thick of it; a positive hotbed. But if there is one course I should avoid,' his eyes withdrew themselves, and the thick glasses blazed into the candlelight once more, 'it would be that of taking any personal steps to initiate you into—into our mysteries. No; I shall leave matters completely to themselves.'

He had scarcely raised his voice; his expression had never wavered; he continued to smile at me; only his thick fingers trembled a little on the tablecloth. But he was grey with rage. It seemed even that the scalp of his head had a little raised the hair on its either side, so intense was his resentment.

'A happy state—ignorance, Mr. Dash. That of our first parents.'

And then, like a fool, I flared up and mentioned Miss Algood. He listened, steadily smiling.

'I see. A superannuated novice, a would-be professional medium,' he insinuated at last with a shrug of his great heavy shoulders. 'You pay your money and you take your choice. Pooh! Banal!'

I hotly defended my well-meaning sentimental old friend.

'Ah, indeed, a retired governess! An—an old maid!' and once more his insolence nearly mastered him. 'Have no fear, Mr. Dash, she is not on *my* visiting list. There are deeps, and vasty deeps.'

With that he thrust out a hand and snatched up the chicken bone that lay on my plate.

'Come out there!' he called baldly. 'Here, *you*!' His head dipped out of sight as he stooped; and a yellowish dog—with a white-gleaming sidelong eye—of which up to the present I had seen or heard no sign, came skulking out from under a chair in the corner of the room to enjoy its evening meal. For awhile only the crunching of teeth on bones broke the silence.

'Greedy, you! You glutton!' Mr. Bloom was cajoling him. 'Aye, but where's Steve? An animal's intelligence, Mr. Dash'—his voice floated up to me from under the other side of the table—'is situated in his belly. And even when one climbs up to human prejudices one usually detects as primitive a source.'

For an instant I could make no reply to this pleasantry. He took advantage of the pause to present me with a smile, and at the same moment filled a little tulip-shaped glass for me with green Chartreuse.

'There, there: I refuse to disagree,' he was saying. 'Your company has been very welcome to me; and—well, one should never embark on one's little private preserves without encouragement. My own in particular meet with very scant courtesy usually. That animal could tell a tale.' The crunching continued. 'Couldn't yer, you old rascal? Where's Steve; where's Steve? Now get along back!' The scrunching ceased. The yellowish dog retreated into its corner.

'And now, Mr. Dash,' declared Mr. Bloom, 'if you have sufficiently refreshed yourself, let us leave these re-

mains. These last few months I have detested being encumbered with servants in the house. A foreign element. They are further away from us, I assure you, in all that really matters, than that rascal, Chunks, there in the corner. Eh, you old devil?' he called at his pet, 'Ain't it so? Now, let me see,' he took out his watch, a gold half-hunter, its engraving almost worn away with long service—'nine o'clock; h'm; h'm; h'm! Just nine! We have a long evening before us. Believe me, I am exceedingly grateful for your company, and regret that—but there, I see you have already condoned an old man's foibles.'

There was something curiously aimless, even pathetic in the tone of that last remark. He had eaten with excellent appetite, and had accounted for at least four-fifths of our champagne. But he rose from the table looking more dejected than I should have supposed possible, and shuffled away in his slippers, as if the last ten minutes had added years to his age.

He was leading the way with one of the candlesticks in his hand, but, to avoid their guttering, I suppose, had blown out two of its candles. A dusky moonlight loomed beyond the long hinged windows of his study. The faint earthy odour of spring and night saturated the air, for one of them was open. He paused at sight of it, glancing about him.

'If there is an animal I cannot endure,' he muttered over his shoulder at me, 'it is the cat—the feline cat. They have a history; they retreat into the past; we meet them in far other circumstances. Yes, yes.'

He had closed and bolted the window, drawn shutters and curtains, while he was speaking.

'And now, bless my soul, Mr. Dash, how about your room—a room for you? I ought to have thought of that

before: bachelor habits. Now where shall we be—put?' With feet close together he stood looking at me. 'My secretary's, now? Would that meet the case? He was a creature for comfort. But one has fancies, reluctances, perhaps. As I say, the upper rooms are all bare, dismantled, though we *might* together put up a camp-bed and—and water in the bath-room. I myself sleep in here.'

He stepped across and drew aside a curtain hung between the bookcases. But there was not light enough to see beyond it.

'The room I propose is also on this floor, so we should not, if need be, be far apart. Eh? What think we? Well, now, come this way.'

He paused. Once more he led me out, and stopped at the third door of the corridor on the left-hand side. So long was *this* pause, one might have supposed he was waiting for permission to enter. I followed him in. It was a lofty room—a bed and sitting-room combined, and its curtains and upholstery were of a pale purple. Its window was shut, the air stuffy and faintly sweet. The bed was in the further corner to the left of the window; and there again the dusky moonlight showed.

I stood looking at the mute inanimate things around me in that blending of the two faint lights. No doubt if I had been ignorant that the owner, or rather user, of the room had made his last exit thence, I should have noticed nothing unusual in its stillness, its vacant calm. And yet, well, I had left a friend only that afternoon still a little breathless after his scramble up the nearer bank of the Jordan. And now—this was the last place on earth—these four walls, these colours, this bookcase, that table, that window—which Mr. Bloom's secretary had set eyes on before setting out, not to return.

My host watched me. He would, I think, have shut and pulled the curtains over these windows too, if I had given him the opportunity.

'How's that, then? You think, you will be—but there, I hesitate to press the matter.... In fact, Mr. Dash, this is the only room I *can* offer you.'

I mumbled my thanks and assured him not very graciously that I should be comfortable.

'Capital!' cried Mr. Bloom. 'Eureka! My only apprehension—well, you know how touchy, how sensitive people can be. Why, my dear Mr. Dash, in a world as superannuated as ours is every other mouthful of air we breathe must have been *some*body's last. I leave you reconciled, then. You will find me in the study, and I can promise you that one little theme shall not intrude on us again. The bee may buzz, but Mr. Bloom will keep his bonnet on! The *fourth* door on the right—after turning to your *right* down the corridor. Ah! I am leaving you no light.'

He lit the twin wax candles on his late secretary's dressing-table, and withdrew.

I myself stood for awhile gazing stupidly out of the window. In spite of his extraordinary fluency, Mr. Bloom, I realized, was a secretive old man. I had realized all along of course that it was not my beautiful eyes he was after; nor even my mere company. The old creature—admirable mask though his outward appearance might be—was on edge. He was detesting his solitude, though until recently, at any rate, it had been the one aim of his life. It had even occurred to me that he was not much missing his secretary. Quite the reverse. He had spoken of him with contempt, but not exactly with the contempt one feels for the completely gone and worsted. Two things appeared to have remained unfor-

given in Mr. Bloom's mind indeed: some acute disagreement between them, and the fact that Mr. Champneys had left him without due notice—unless inefficient lungs constitute due notice.

I took one of the candles and glanced at the books. They were chiefly of fiction and a little poetry, but there was one on mosses, one on English birds, and a little medical handbook in green cloth. There was also a complete row of manuscript books with pigskin backs labelled *Proceedings*. I turned to the writing-table. Little there of interest—a stopped clock, a dried-up inkwell, a tarnished silver cup, and one or two more books: *The Sentimental Journey*, a *Thomas à Kempis*, bound in limp maroon leather. I opened the *Thomas à Kempis* and read the spidery inscription on the fly-leaf: 'To darling Sidney, with love from Mother. F. C.' It startled me, as if I had been caught spying. 'Life surely should never come quite to this,' some secret sentimental voice within piped out of the void. I shut the book up.

The drawer beneath contained only envelopes and letter paper—*Montrésor*, in large pale-blue letters on a 'Silurian' background—and a black book, its cover stamped with the word *Diary*: and on the fly-leaf, 'S. S. Champneys.' I glanced up, then turned to the last entry—dated only a few months before—just a few scribbled words: 'Not me, at any rate: not *me*. But even if I could get away for——' the ink was smudged and had left its ghost on the blank page opposite it. A mere scrap of handwriting and that poor hasty smudge of ink—they resembled an incantation. Mr. Bloom's secretary seemed also to be intent on sharing his secrets with me. I shut up that book too, and turned away. I washed my hands in S. S. C.'s basin, and—with my fingers—did my hair in his glass. I even caught myself beginning to undress

—sheer reluctance, I suppose, to go back and face another cataract of verbiage.

To my astonishment a log fire was handsomely burning in the grate when at length I returned to the study, and Mr. Bloom, having drawn up two of his voluminous vermilion arm-chairs in front of it, was now deeply and amply encased in one of them. He had taken off his spectacles, and appeared to be asleep. But his eyes opened at my footstep. He had been merely 'resting' perhaps.

'I hope', was his greeting, 'you found everything needful, Mr. Dash? In the circumstances. . . .'

He called this up at me as if I were deaf or at a distance, but his tone subsided again. 'There's just one little matter we missed, eh?—night attire! Not that you wouldn't find a complete trousseau to choose from in the wardrobe. My secretary, in fact, was inclined to the foppish. No blame; no blame; fine feathers, Mr. Dash.'

It is, thank heaven, an unusual experience to be compelled to spend an evening as the guest of a stranger one distrusts. It was not only that Mr. Bloom's manner was obviously a mask but even the occasional stupidity of his remarks seemed to be an affectation—and one of an astute and deliberate kind. And yet Montrésor—in itself it was a house of unusual serenity and charm. Its urbane eighteenth-century reticence showed in every panel and moulding. One fell in love with it at first sight, as with an open, smiling face. And then—a look in the eyes! It reeked of the dubious and distasteful. But how can one produce definite evidence for such sensations as these? They lie outside the tests even of Science—as do a good many other things that refuse to conform with the norm of human evidence.

Mr. Bloom's company at a dinner-party or a *conversazione*, shall we say, might have proved refreshingly droll. He did his best to make himself amusing. He had read widely—and in out-of-the-way books, too; and he had an unusual range of interests. We discussed music and art—and he brought out portfolio after portfolio of drawings and etchings to illustrate some absurd theory he had of the one, and played a scrap or two of Debussy's and of Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit* to prove some far-fetched little theory of his own about the other. We talked of Chance and Dreams and Disease and Heredity, edged on to Woman, and skated rapidly away. He dismissed life as 'an episode in disconcerting surroundings', and scuttled off from a detraction of St. Francis of Assisi to the problem of pain.

'Mr. Dash, we *fear* pain too much—and the giving of it. The very mention of the word stifles us. And how un-Christian!'

The look he peeked down at me at this was proof enough that he was intent only on leading me on and drawing me out. But I was becoming a little more cautious, and mumbled that that kind of philosophy best begins at home.

'Aye, indeed! A retort, a retort. With Charity on the other side of the hearth in a mob-cap and carpet slippers, I suppose? I see the dear creature: I see her! Still, you will agree, even *you* will agree that once, Mr. Dash, the head has lost its way in the heart, one's brain-pan might as well be a basin of soap-bubbles. A man of feeling, by all means—but just a trace, a *soupçon* of rationality, well, it serves! Eh?'

A few minutes afterwards, in the midst of a discourse on the progress of human thought, he suddenly enquired if I cared for the game of backgammon.

'And why not? Or draughts? Or *solitaire*, Mr. Dash? —a grossly underestimated amusement.'

But all this badinage, these high spirits were clearly an elaborate disguise, and a none too complimentary one at that. He was 'keeping it up' to keep *me* up; and may be, to keep himself up. Much of it was automatic—mere mental antics. Like a Thibetan praying-wheel, his mind went round and round. And his attention was divided. One at least of those long, fleshy, hairy ears was cocked in another direction. And at last the question that had been on my tongue throughout most of the evening popped out almost inadvertently. I asked if he was expecting a visitor. At the moment his round black back was turned on me; he was rummaging in a corner cupboard for glasses to accompany the decanter of whisky he had produced; his head turned slyly on his heavy shoulders.

'A visitor? You astonish me. Here? Now? As if, my dear Mr. Dash, this rural retreat were Bloomsbury or Mayfair. You amuse me. Callers! Thank heaven, not so. You came, you saw, but you did not *expect* a welcome. The unworthy tenant of Montrésor took you by surprise. Confess it! So be it. And why not? What if you yourself were my looked-for visitor? What then? There are surmises, intuitions, forebodings—to give a pleasant tinge to the word. Yes, yes, I agree. I was on the watch; patiently, *patiently*. In due time your charming little car appears at my gate. You pause: I say to myself, Here he is. Company at last; discussion; powwow; even controversy perhaps. Why not? We are sharing the same hemisphere. Plain as a pikestaff. I foresaw your decision as may the shepherd in contemplation of a red sunrise foresee the deluge. I step downstairs; and here we are!'

My reply came a little more warmly than I intended. I assured Mr. Bloom that if it had not been for the loss of my key, I shouldn't have stayed five minutes. 'I prefer *not* to be expected in a strange house.' It was unutterably *gauche*.

He chuckled; he shrugged his shoulders; he was vastly amused. 'Ah, but are we not forgetting that such little misadventures are merely part and parcel of the general plan? The end-shaping process, as the poet puts it?'

'What general plan?'

'Mr. Dash, when you fire out your enquiries at me like bullets out of the muzzle of a gun, I am positively disconcerted, I can scarcely keep my wits together. Pray let us no longer treat each other like witnesses in the witness-box, or even'—a cat-like smile crept into his face—'like prisoners in the dock. Have a little whisky? Pure malt; a tot? It may be whimsical, but for me one of the few exasperating things about my poor secretary, Mr. Champneys, was his aversion to "alcohol". His own word! £300 a year—Mr. Dash. No less. And everything "found". No expenses except tobacco, shockers—his own word again—pyjamas, tooth-powder and petrol—a motor-bicycle, in fact, soon *hors de combat*. And "alcohol", if you please! The libel! These specialists! Soda water or Apollinaris?'

In sheer chagrin I drank the stuff, and rose to turn in. Not a bit of it! With covert glances at his watch, Mr. Bloom kept me there by hook and by crook until it was long past midnight, and try as he might to conceal it, the disquietude that had peeped out earlier in the evening became more and more obvious. The only effect of this restlessness on his talk, however, was to increase its volume and incoherence. If Mr. Bloom had been play-

acting, and had been cast for his own character, his improvisations could not have been more masterly. He made no pretence now of listening to my own small part in this display; and when he did, it was only in order to attend to some other business he had in mind. Ever and again, as if to emphasize his point, he would haul himself up out of his deep-bottomed chair, and edge off towards the door—with the pretence perhaps of looking for a book. He would pause there for but an instant—and the bumbling muffled voice would yet again take up the strain. Once, however, he came to a dead stop, raised his hand and openly stood listening.

'A nightingale certainly; if not two,' he murmured *sotto voce*, 'but tell me, Mr. Dash,' he called softly out across the room, 'was I deceived into thinking I heard a distant knocking? In a house as large as this; articles of some value perhaps; we read even of violence. You never can tell.'

I enquired with clumsy irony if there would be anything remarkable in a knocking. 'Don't your friends ever volunteer even a rap or two on their own account? I should have supposed it would be the least they could offer.'

'A signal; m'm; a rap or two;' he echoed me blandly. 'Why that?'

'From "the other side"?'

'Eh? Eh?' he suddenly broke off, his cheek whitening; the sole cause of his dismay being merely a scratching at the door-panel, announcing that his faithful pet had so much wearied of solitude in the dining-room that he had come seeking even his master's company. But Mr. Bloom did not open the door.

'Be off!' he called at the panel. 'Away, sir! To your mat! That dog, Mr. Dash, is more than human—or

shall we say, less than human?' The words were jovial enough, but the lips that uttered them trembled beneath his beard.

I had had enough, and this time had my way. He accompanied me to the door of the study but not further, and held out his hand.

'If by any chance', he scarcely more than murmured, 'you should want anything in the night, you will remember, of course, where to find me; I am in there.' He pointed. 'On the other hand,' he laid his hand again on my arm, deprecatingly, almost as if with shy affection—'I am an exceedingly poor sleeper. And occasionally I find a brief amble round proves a sedative. Follow me up? At any alarm, eh? I should welcome it. But to-night I expect—nothing.'

He drew-to the door behind him. 'Have you ever tried my own particular little remedy for insomnia? Cold air? And perhaps a hard biscuit, to humour the digestion. But *fol, lol*, a young man—no: the machine comparatively new! My housekeeper returns at six: breakfast, I hope, at eight-thirty. A most punctual woman; a treasure. But then, servants; I detest the whole race of them. Good night; good night. And none of those *Proceedings*, I warn you!'

But even now I had not completely shaken him off. He hastened after me, puffing as he came, and clutched at my coat sleeve.

'What I was meaning, Mr. Dash, is that I have never attempted to make converts—a fruit, let me tell you, that from being at first incredibly raw and unwholesome, rapidly goes rotten. Besides, my secretary had very little talent for marshalling facts. That's why I mentioned the *Proceedings*. A turn for *writing*, maybe, but no method. Just that. And now, of course, you *must* go. Our even-

ing is at an end. But who knows? Of course. Never matter. What must come, comes.'

At last I was free, though a hoarse whisper presently pursued me down the corridor. 'No need for caution, Mr. Dash, should you need me. No infants, no invalids; sleep well.'

Having put my candlestick on the table, shut the door of Mr. Champneys's bedroom, and very cautiously locked it, I sat down on the bed to think things over. Easier said than done. The one thing in my mind was relief at finding myself alone again, and of extreme distaste (as I wound my watch) at the recollection of how many hours still remained before dawn. I opened the window and looked out. My room was at the back of the house, then; and over yonder must lie the lake, ebon-black under the stars. I listened for the water-birds, but not a sound. Mr. Bloom's nightingales, too, if not creatures of his imagination, had ceased to lament. A ground mist wreathed the boles of the chestnut trees, soundlessly lapping their lowermost boughs.

I drew in. The draught had set my candles guttering. Almost automatically I opened one of the long drawers in Mr. Champneys's chest. It was crammed with his linen. Had he no relatives, then, I wondered, or had Mr. Bloom succeeded to his property? Such gay pyjamas would grace an Arabian prince; of palest blue silk with 'S.S.C.' in beautiful scarlet lettering. It was needlessly fastidious perhaps, but I left them undisturbed.

There were a few photographs above the chimney-piece; but photographs of the relatives and friends of a deceased stranger are not exhilarating company. Mr. Champneys himself being dead, they seemed to be tinged with the same eclipse. One of them was a snapshot of a tall, dark, young man, in tennis clothes. He was smil-

ing; he had a longish nose; a tennis racket was under his arm; and a tiny strip of maroon and yellow ribbon had been glued to the glass of the frame. Another Champneys, a brother, perhaps. I stood there, idly gazing at it for minutes together, as if in search of inspiration.

No talker has ever more completely exhausted me than Mr. Bloom. Even while I was still deep in contemplation of the photograph I was seized suddenly with a series of yawns almost painful in their extremity. I turned away. My one longing was for the bath-room. But no—Mr. Bloom had failed to show me the way there, and any attempt to find it for myself might involve me in more talk. It is embarrassing to meet anyone after farewells have been said—and *that* one?—no. Half-dressed, and having hunted in vain for a second box of matches, I lay down on the bed, drew its purple quilt over me—after all, Mr. Bloom's secretary had not died in it!—and blew out my candle.

I must have at once fallen asleep—a heavy and, seemingly, dreamless sleep. And now, as if in a moment I was awake again—completely wide awake, as if at an inward signal. Night had gone; the creeping grey of dawn was at the window, its colder, mist-burdened airs filled the room. I lay awhile inert, sharply scrutinizing my surroundings, realizing precisely where I was and at the same time that something was radically and inexplicably wrong with them. What?

It is difficult to suggest; but it was as if a certain aspect—the *character* of the room, its walls, angles, patterns, furniture, had been peculiarly intensified. Whatever was naturally grotesque in it was now more grotesque—and less real. Matter seldom advertises the precariousness imputed to it by the physicist. But now, every object

around me seemed to be proclaiming its impermanence, the danger, so to speak, it was in. With a conviction that thrilled me like an unexpected touch of ice, I suddenly realized that this is how Mr. Champneys's room would appear to anyone who had become for some reason or another intensely afraid. It may sound wildly preposterous, but there it is. I myself was *not* afraid—there was as yet nothing to be afraid of; and yet everything I saw seemed to be dependent on that most untrustworthy but vivid condition of consciousness. Once let my mind, so to speak, accept the evidences of my senses, then I should be as helpless as the victim of a drug or of the wildest nightmare. I sat there, stiff and cold, eyeing the door.

And then I heard the sound of voices: the faint, hollow, incoherent sound that voices make at a distance in a large house. At that, I confess, a deadly chill came over me. I stepped soundlessly on to the floor, looked about me but in vain in the half-light for the coat I had been wearing the previous night, and slipped on instead a pair of Mr. Champneys's slippers and the floral silk dressing gown that hung on the door-hook. In these, I was not exactly myself, but at any rate ready for action. It took me half a minute to unlock the door; caution is snail-slow. I was shivering a little, but that may have been due to the cold May morning. The voices were more distinct now; one of them, I fancied, was Mr. Bloom's. But there was a curious similarity between them; so much so that I may have been playing eavesdropper to Mr. Bloom talking to himself. The sound was filtering down from an upper room; the corridor beneath, and now in its perspective stretching out before me in the pallor of dawn, being as still as a drop-scene in a theatre, the footlights out.

I listened, but could detect no words. And then the

talking ceased. There came a sort of thump at the *other* end of the house, and then, overhead, the sound as of someone retreating towards me—heavily, unaccustomedly, but at a pretty good pace. Inaction is unnerving; and yet I hesitated, detesting the thought of meeting Mr. Bloom again (and especially if he had company). But that little risk had to be taken; there was no help for it. I tiptoed along the corridor and looked into his study.

The curtain at the further end of the room was drawn a little aside. A deep-piled Turkey carpet covered the floor. I crossed it, soundlessly, and looked in. The light here was duskier than in my own room, and at first, after one comprehensive glance, I saw nothing unusual except that near at hand and beside a chair on which a black morning-coat had been flung, was a small bed, half-covered by a travelling rug; and standing beside it, a familiar pair of boots. Unmistakable, ludicrous, excellent boots! Empty as only boots can be, they squatted there side by side, like creatures by no means mute, yet speechless. And towards the foot of the bed, on a little round table drawn up beside it, lay the miscellaneous contents, obviously, of Mr. Bloom's pockets. The old gold watch and the spade guinea, a note-case, a pocket-book, a pencil-case, a scrap of carved stained ivory, an antique silver tooth-pick, a couple of telegram envelopes, a bunch of keys, a heap of loose money—I see them all, but I see even more distinctly—and it was actually hob-nobbing with the spade-guinea—a Yale key. Why Mr. Bloom emptied his pockets at night, I cannot guess—a mere habit perhaps. To that habit none the less I owe, perhaps, the brevity of my acquaintance with him.

There is, I suppose, no limit to human stupidity. Never until this moment had it occurred to me that Mr. Bloom himself might have been responsible for the loss

of my key, that he had in fact purloined it. I stole nearer, and examined his. Yale keys at a casual glance are almost as like one another as leaves on a tree. Was this mine? I was uncertain. I must risk it. And it baffles me why I should have been so fastidious about it. Mr. Bloom had not been fastidious. The distant footsteps seemed now to be dully thumping down a remote flight of wooden stairs, and it was unmistakably *his* voice that I heard faintly booming as if in querulous protestation, and with all its manlier resonance and its gusto gone.

'Yes, yes: coming, coming!' and the footsteps stumped on.

Well, I had no wish to meddle in any assignation. I had long since suspected that Mr. Bloom's activities may have proved responsible for guests even more undesirable than myself, even though, unlike myself, they may, perhaps, have been of a purely subjective order. Like attracts like, I assume, in *any* sphere. Still raw prejudices such as mine were not exactly a fair test of his peculiar methods of spiritistic investigation. More generous critics might merely surmise that he had only pressed on a little further than most. That is all: a pioneer.

What—as I turned round—I was not prepared for was the spectacle of Mr. Bloom's bed. When I entered the room, I am certain there had been nothing unusual about that, except that it had not been slept in. True, the light had meanwhile increased a little, but not much. No, the bed had then been empty.

Not so now. The lower part of it was all but entirely flat, the white coverlid having been drawn almost as neat and close from side to side of it as the carapace of a billiard table. But on the pillow—the grey-flecked brown beard protruding over the turned-down sheet—now showed what appeared to be the head and face of Mr.

Bloom. With chin jerked up, I watched that face steadily, transfixedly. It was a flawless facsimile, waxen, motionless; but it was not a real face and head. It was an hallucination. How induced is quite another matter. No spirit of life, no livingness had ever stirred those soap-like, stagnant features. It was a travesty utterly devoid —whatever its intention—of the faintest hint of humour. It was merely a mask, a life-like mask (past even the dexterity of a Chinese artist to rival), and—though I hardly know why—it was inconceivably shocking.

My objections to indiscriminate spiritualism the evening before may have been hasty and shallow. They seemed now to have been grotesquely inadequate. This house was not haunted, it was infested. Catspaw, poor young Mr. Champneys may have been, but he had indeed helped with the chestnuts. A horrible weariness swept over me. Without another glance at the bed, I made my way as rapidly as possible to the door—and broke into a run.

Still thickly muffled with her last journey's dust—except for the finger-prints I afterwards noticed on her bonnet—and just as I had left her the previous evening, my car stood awaiting me in the innocent blue of dawn beneath the porch. So must Tobias have welcomed his angel. My heart literally stood still as I inserted the key —but all was well. The first faint purring of the engine was accompanied by the sound of a window being flung open. It was above and behind me, and beyond the porch. I turned my head, and detected a vague greyish figure standing a little within cover of the hollies and ilexes—a short man, about twenty or thirty yards away, not looking at me. But he too may have been pure illusion, pure hallucination. When I had blinked and looked again he was gone. There was no sunshine yet;

the garden was as still as a mechanical panorama, but the hubbub, the gabbling was increasing overhead.

In an instant I had shot out from under the porch, and dignity forgotten, was on my way helter-skelter round the semicircular drive. But to my utter confusion the gates at this end of it were heavily padlocked. I all but stripped the gears in my haste to retreat, but succeeded none the less; and then, without so much as turning my head towards the house, I drove clean across the lawn, the boughs of the blossom-burdened trees actually brushing the hood of the car as I did so. In five minutes I must have been nearly as many miles from Mr. Bloom's precincts.

It was fortunate perhaps the day was so early; even the most phlegmatic of rural constables might look a little askance at a motorist desperately defying the speed limit in a purple dressing-gown and red morocco slippers. But I was innocent of robbery, for in exchange for these articles I had left behind me as valuable a jacket and a pair of brown leather shoes. I wonder what they will fetch at the sale? I wonder if Mr. Bloom would have offered me Mr. Champneys's full £300 *per annum* if I had consented to stay? He was sorely in need, I am afraid, of human company, and a less easily prejudiced ally might have been of help to him in his extremity. But *I* ran away.

And it is now too late to make amends. He has gone home—as we all shall—and taken his wages. And what troubles me, and now and then with acute misgiving, is the thought of Miss Algood. She was so simple and so easy a prey to enthusiasm. She dabbled her fingers in the obscure waters frequented by Mr. Bloom as heedlessly and as absorbedly as some little dark intense creature on the banks of the Serpentine over a gallipot of

'tiddlers'. I hate to think of any of 'them' taking her seriously—or even otherwise; and of the possibility also, when she is groping her way through their underworld, for she never really found it in this—the possibility of her meeting him there. For whatever Mr. Bloom's company in his charming house may have consisted *of*—and here edges in the obscure problem of what the creatures of our thoughts, let alone our dreams, are 'made on'—and quite apart too from Mr. Bloom's personal appearance, character, and 'effects', my chief quarrel with him was his scorn of my old harmless family friend. I would like, if only I could, to warn her against him—those dark, affectionate, saddened, hungry eyes.

WILLOWS

THE 2.17 P.M. this lovely, sleepy, precocious afternoon left only one passenger behind it on the wooden platform of the minute country station of Ashenham. Its volumes of vapour went ballooning up under the immense blue dome of the heavens; its nearly empty compartments rolled by; it was gone. And lo, Ronnie Forbes. With a short-sighted but observant glance at his rural whereabouts he stuffed his French novel into his pocket, gave up his ticket, passed through the booking-office and looked round for a cab. Here, however, the only signs of life were an empty farm-wagon, a gaudy red and yellow reaping machine, and a bevy of sparrows engaged in a dust bath.

He turned back, and with that bland air of assurance which sets its possessor at ease in any company, he enquired of the porter if he knew of a house called Willows. The porter was so old and so old-fashioned that he touched his hat when he replied. He knew Willows well. Mrs. Cotton's house. And he gave Ronnie copious and reiterated directions how to get there. It lay about two-and-a-half miles distant. You turned to the left at

the signpost after passing the 'Green Man', took the third turning on the right—a little before you reached the old windmill—and went straight on until you came to a little old stone bridge over a stream. And there you were. Why, yes, there *was* a fly, and it *could* be fetched from the village—and that was a mile or so in the other direction. But it was an easy walk if you liked walking; 'And you can't miss it, sir,' he repeated again and again. It was as though here was an ardent pilgrim, and there, Mecca. Ronnie didn't quite see himself descending on his prey in lonely grandeur in the village cab, and he had plenty of time. He waived the suggestion, and at once set out.

No rain seemed to have refreshed the white dusty road for months past; indeed, on a chalky soil even a plenteous fall of dew vanishes into thin air when once the morning sun is up. But the meadows beyond the leafy hedgerow on the one side were as gay as a picture, and the dark acres of ploughland on the other were already sheened over with the first blades of sprouting corn. Sophisticated and urban creature though he looked amid this rural scene, Ronnie went on his way rejoicing.

Nor did his footsteps flag until he had passed the rather tumbledown 'Green Man' and the incredibly old traditional broadside gaffer in gaiters who sat with his beard and his blue-and-white mug on a bench under its motionless sign. Still, it was warm work, and as soon as a gateway showed, Ronnie came to a standstill and took off his hat. He leant both arms on the gate and looked over and in. The pasture in front of him rose in a smooth wide curve of the embosoming earth against the pure blue of the sky, and there in the tender sunshine stood browsing sedate old mother ewes, while others, no less stolidly maternal of aspect, sat motionless in the lush

young grass. How human, and how stupid, they looked, thought Ronnie: and how engaging!

And round about these sober dames was a host of long-legged lambs, their small inquisitive faces all turned in his direction, with sudden tremors of dangling flat woolly tails, and zigzag leapings and skippings aside in full butt of their mothers' dugs. What adorable country! And the woods over there, a faint purple with their bare twigs, though a few were now full in their virgin young leaf! Larks, too—it was impossible to say how many. It was as though each one of them had its own spiral pitch in the blue, and had only to range that airy and invisible tower to keep its walls for ever echoing with song.

Ronnie took a deep breath: it was little short of absurd—the combination of such a day and such an errand! None the less he had made pretty certain of fine weather before setting out. For he hadn't the faintest notion what kind of house and what kind of people were awaiting him. They might be perfectly awful, quite too impossible. Imagine that and a shivering leaden day together! On the other hand, the house might prove to be empty. Imagine *that*, and rain pelting down upon its abandoned porch! However, the porter had settled the question: 'Mrs. Cotton's house'—his very words. She was still there, then. But had the inquiring emphasis he had put on the name suggested something the least bit formidable? Ronnie shuddered. He did so dislike raw, unpleasant, intractable people.

What a silly expedition! It all came of this touching greed on the other side of the Atlantic for the academic; this thesis craze. But data at second hand, was that really quite proper? Ronnie was still dubious. Surely any young zealot bent on a thesis should conduct his own investigations, should himself play sexton to his dead and

buried subject, and with his own privy paw, dig it up again. It was the least one would expect of him.

Yet here was this young American friend of his—and with the most endearing enthusiasm in the world—calmly devolving this little obligation on himself. Ronnie had agreed, of course, that James Cotton's poems were worth excavation, and that could hardly be said of most of his contemporaries. Brief life was here *their* portion. And though a few of them were still alive their works were almost as dead as mutton. Not so James Cotton: precisely the reverse in fact. His achievement had been rivalled only by his promise—a promise, however, which could scarcely be said to have been kept, since after the publication of that first 'slender' volume—to use the reviewers' unanimous epithet—it had dwindled away into a mere pamphlet, the contents of which had been luminous enough in sparks, but in general so obscure as to be almost disconcerting.

What these later poems 'promised'—and four whole years separated the two books—well, Ronnie couldn't for the life of him imagine. It was veiled in an Egyptian darkness. Not that he knew even the little of James Cotton there was to know by *heart*. By no means. He felt a little conscience-stricken at thought of it—just in case in an hour or two he might be in for a catechism on the subject.

The truth was, of course, that in American seats of learning nowadays there are not nearly enough themes-for-theses to go round. You can hardly see literature for the *littérateurs*. For that very reason it was a stroke of pure luck for his young friend to have chanced on James Cotton. Except for an article—'an appreciation'—published about nine years before in one of the heavier Reviews, James was still practically virgin soil.

And what an owlish and incredible performance that had been.

Take, for example, the lovely country in which Ronnie was now disporting himself. There hadn't been a single word in the article from start to finish to suggest what delightfully Blake-like surroundings the young poet had enjoyed in his childhood. The little shallow stream that was now tinkling at Ronnie's side over its sunny stones beneath a screen of vast-boughed elms with their clanking chaffinches; that hill over there, almost gaudy from crown to base with budded larch—it was all so rich, so gentle and so deliciously English.

And then, after the barest mention of Ashenham, to have asserted that the poet had gone and died in foreign parts! Byron and Shelley were exiles, of course, and so was Landor. Keats had gone to die in Rome. Cyril Charlton in his paper had been eloquence itself about all *that*. But Trinidad! Ronnie, all alone as he was, all but burst out laughing at the sound of the syllables in his mind. A charming asphaltic island, no doubt, but if you were pulling the long and sentimental bow why not have said Tobago—which has at least a pleasing suggestion of tapioca. But Trinidad! Those dreadful d's—like the slabs of a sarcophagus.

And his enthusiastic young American friend in every single letter on the subject had been so emphatic about Trinidad. He had even coquetted with the prospect of embarking for Port of Spain to look up the poet's inscription on his tomb-stone. How deliciously naïve. But Ronnie knew better. Wherever else *his* James Cotton may have deceased—he waggled his cane in the air to emphasize the point—he hadn't closed his eyes for the last time on *that* island. And, among other little duties, Ronnie was now well on his way to prove it.

He smiled to himself and, as there was plenty of time if he was to arrive at a polite hour, he came to a standstill again, and stooping his slightly tubby figure over the warm lichenous stones of the little old bridge, gazed into the amber running water beneath. Minnows—he watched them disporting themselves in their watery sun-dappled shallows, and almost subsided into a day-dream. The simple little fishes had reminded Ronnie that he had once been young himself, and was now, well, getting middle-aged. Whither had fled their visionary gleam? In those far years they wouldn't have reminded him of whitebait! Yet Ronnie, too, in his salad days had published a sheaf of essays.

Yes. But what ages ago they seemed, and how raw a Ronnie then! One can't really *live* in two worlds at once. Yet even the most dilettantish of interests in some other than the prosperous one he was now occupying was, perhaps, better than none. A faint splendour lightened his mission. Whatever else he might have been, James Cotton's venture into poetry had been the real thing. And now Ronnie was on his way to inquire exactly how and when and where and why, and so on. A literary Sherlock Holmes.

With a look that might almost be described as grumpy he abandoned the minnows and went on. And now the stream had left him, *fa lero lero loo*. It had sallied off under a low-vaulted arch, danced over with reflected sunbeams, and a high stone wall flanking the lane had taken its place; an old wall too, with a rain-worn stone coping and with clumps of matted ivy and valerian bunching over it here and there.

'A little cottage girl' in a pinafore and with lank strands of yellow hair was approaching. When Ronnie asked for 'Willows' she put her finger into her mouth and, gazing

at him out of forget-me-not blue eyes, pointed mutely to a gateway not thirty yards distant. She might have come straight out of *We are Seven*. Ronnie smiled at her as cherubically as he could manage, and yet, though he could not have said why, out of a mist of misgivings.

'Don't for Jehoshaphat's sake *write* to these Cotton people,' his young American friend had implored him. 'Even that Charlton guy seems to have been a little dubious about his reception. And no wonder! He is deadly effusive under that mincing style; but after *that*, if they had any warning they might stave you off for good. As I say, it's ten to one there will be nobody to remember J. C. now, but please be a dear and make sure. It would be no end of a scoop if I could get really fresh new-laid first-hand stuff about him—all his little ways and wiles, a few private letters *par excellence*, and photographs, of course. He seems to have been a hermit even in his twenties, and who knows what queer fish may not have shared his pond. But for heaven's sake don't *write* to them; just press the button and say you've come. *You*'ll know best, of course; and this is sheer hippopotamus talk.'

This, of course, as Ronnie had decided at the time, was all very nice and exuberant and pleasant and characteristic. But now, as—after surveying the one faint word 'Willows' on the old green paint—he pushed the gate open, and turned in on the weedy path, he couldn't help noticing that he felt a little self-conscious, even *gauche*. The very grass, the bead-bright moss on the pebbles, hinted seclusion. Even the blackbirds seemed to be surprised to see a visitor. The rustic lettering of that 'Willows', the serenity and unnoticeableness of it all—Ronnie all but then and there experienced a change of heart.

Even if one does publish a book of poems when one is

scarcely out of one's teens—*i.e.*, even if one does scatter one's pearls before a public that much prefers wash, it doesn't in itself exactly justify any more fastidious enquirer from the country of the Gadarenes in pushing his nose in years after one has died and been buried in Trinidad merely to pick up tasty bits of gossip for a thesis! Good heavens, what deeds are done in thy name, O Muses!

The path wound round. The persistent shallow stream rippled into view again, and over there, across a verdant meadow, not yet in the buttercup stage, stood bushed in beauty—not a few crazy old pollard relics of willows, but a full-boughed bountiful grove of them. And a little to eastward of them, in the haze of the afternoon sun, lay a smallish, low-roofed, quite ordinary-looking, quiet and glinting country house. Not very old, but, on the other hand, not very new.

Some poets have opened their eyes for the first time on the amenities of Camberwell; some, on those of Chicago. Weeds may flourish, with an effort, in a gravel path. But little James Cotton had been fortunate indeed in the place where he was born, even though there appeared to be no surplus income just now to keep it up. No actual neglect, but obviously no under-gardener. Did thick creepers make a house damp or did they keep the bricks dry? It was one of the two, but Ronnie couldn't remember which. And anyhow, the *Pyrus japonica*, with its shallow-cupped wine-red flowers, and the bushy-bloomed laurestinus did not seem to mind.

Ronnie took it all in, though his eyes remained discreetly downcast, just in case he was being observed from the windows. Better no appearance of boldness. And so, cane in hand, light overcoat over arm, he stepped at last into the embowered porch, and gave a vigorous tug

at the twisted iron bell-pull. Its distant tinkling dwindled away, and except, as he fancied, for the sound of a firm but hasty footstep that had immediately followed it, only the shrillings of the skylarks overhead now broke the quiet.

Ronnie was no Miss Brontë. He was not one of those shy (and sometimes even elderly) creatures that ring and run away. He was entirely unalarmed at strangers. Nevertheless, as he stood waiting there, he was hoping solely for the best—that nobody was at home. Why not? He had enjoyed his country walk. Here was the house. Let sleeping poets lie. He would have done his duty, and theses might go to the devil.

A moment after, at sight of a stiff, high-capped, ageing, and obviously unfriendly maidservant, he changed his mind. The least symptom of opposition not only decoyed him on, but increased his natural suavity. He enquired if this was 'Willows', and on being assured by an abrupt nod that it was, he asked if it were still occupied by a lady of the name of Cotton, and *that* being so, might he perhaps be favoured with a few minutes of her valuable time.

'Mrs. Cotton is not well enough to see visitors,' was the stony retort. And the grey eyes that continued to regard him after the narrow lips had shut again, hinted that for the word visitor he might, if he chose, substitute such a synonym, say, as hawker or tax-collector. But Ronnie was easily able not to feel a little piqued. He smiled, and remarked, 'I am Mr. Ronald Forbes,' and at the same time drew out of his pocket-book, and presented this dragon with—a visiting-card. 'I wouldn't detain Mrs. Cotton for more than a few moments,' he assured her, sagaciously raising his voice a little. 'It is merely to ask her kindness in a matter in which we are both deeply

interested. And for this reason I hoped she would forgive me anything in the nature of an intrusion.'

The maid took the card between finger and thumb. She appeared to be still hesitating whether to keep it as a trophy or to return it, when a voice out of the beyond, and apparently from the landing of the shallow staircase nearly opposite the door, decided the question.

'Show this gentleman into the drawing-room, please, Fanny. I will be with him in a few moments.'

Having proffered his hat to his enemy, who far from accepting it did not even waste a glance on its beautiful lining, Ronnie laid it with his light overcoat on a small mahogany bench that stood beneath an engraving of one of Raphael's masterpieces. And he stood up his cane beside it. He glanced at the barometer which hung on the 'flock' crimson-papered wall on the other side, and an instant afterwards found himself in a room, his first impression of which suggested that he had been shown into a hot-house by mistake.

It was not only a study in all shades of green, but even more verdant in effect than anything which spring had managed to regale him with on his way from the station. Ronnie had a lively eye for colour. It roved from the moss-green carpet to the curtains of green French flowered brocade, to the sage-green wall-paper, and so, one by one, on to the Victorian 'easy' chairs, upholstered in a colour which in cooler circumstances would have suggested the cucumber.

But this verdure was not all artifice. In a recess near the shut small-paned window on his left stood a wooden erection of shelves, upon which pots of flowers in full bloom were banked in the utmost profusion. With the result that the room—much longer than it was wide, its French windows at the further end being also tight shut,

though the afternoon sun swept steadily through them in a motionless cascade—the room smelt like some delicious fruit-pie. Freesia, perhaps.

Ronnie stood there in his elegant West-end clothes, right in the middle of it, as if he were an egg-cup under the crust of the low-moulded ceiling, while portraits in oils of what he assumed to be deceased Cottons surveyed him from every wall. He was warm after his walk in this precocious spring weather, and though his reception had been a little chilly his present haven was very much the reverse. And as he glanced from portrait to portrait he was conscious of an almost irresistible impulse to giggle, and at the same time more disquietingly aware than ever that his dossier, so to speak, was rather on the nebulous side. Ronnie had read the poems, but not lately. He could appreciate verse with extreme rapidity; but now that the crisis was at hand, actual remembrance of salient specimens, and even of the precise quality of the collection, had suddenly eluded him.

Perhaps this was in part because the low firm voice he had heard on the staircase had continued to sound on in his ear. He was still vaguely engaged in an attempt to recover his *amour propre*, of which he had an ample supply, when the door by which he had entered opened, and he found himself, smile for smile, confronting a lady of substantial proportions, whom he judged to be somewhat on the other side of sixty. Her elaborately dressed hair closely fitted her square practical head. There were still traces of auburn in its grey. And out of the wide flattish face beneath, with its small square formidable nose, green-grey eyes motionlessly examined him.

With a curt but not unfriendly nod of her head this lady referred him to a low flounced arm-chair, which splayed its short Victorian legs full in the light of the

French windows, while she seated herself in a less comfortable one immediately opposite him.

Ronnie cleared his throat, but paused.

'I understand you wished to see *me*,' she said. 'Am I right in supposing that I owe the pleasure of your visit to an interest in the writings of my son, Mr. James Cotton?'

Ronnie's neatly proportioned hand wandered to his neck-tie, and he opened his mouth to reply.

'I see,' Mrs. Cotton continued pleasantly—'I see I have guessed right. Please tell me then exactly what I can do for you.'

If only, thought Ronnie, the good lady would look the other way for a moment, he might hope to make a much better show. On the contrary she sat stoically upright in her chair, her shoulders squared above her fortified bosom, her knees close together over her square-toed shoes, her whole frame encased in a primrose-coloured afternoon gown—its only adornments a cameo brooch on a small black bow, a thin gold chain about her neck, and a cluster of sapphires on her wedding-ring finger—while she steadily continued to hold his eyes.

'It is very kind indeed of you,' began Ronnie. 'I was afraid that a visit like this from a complete stranger, and without any warning or introduction, could not but seem in the nature of an intrusion. To be quite candid, Mrs. Cotton, I was afraid that if I wrote to you first, asking for the privilege of such an opportunity, I might be—well, misunderstood.'

'That', was the reply, 'would all depend on what you actually said in your letter.'

'Yes,' retorted Ronnie warmly. 'But then you know what letters are. Besides, as a matter of fact I have come, not on my own behalf—though, in a sense, that very

much too, for I am, of course, *deeply* interested—but on behalf of a friend of mine, a young American, now at the University of Ohio. He is most anxious to——'

But Mrs. Cotton had suavely interrupted him. 'Almost exactly nine years have gone by, Mr. Forbes, since I have heard of any one being interested enough in my son's writings to come all the way from London, as I see you have—let alone America—to tell me so. I receive letters now and then, but very few. But although, as I say, nine years have gone by, that particular occasion is still quite fresh in my mind. Your friend may not perhaps have seen an article which appeared about that time in the *Modern Literature Review*?'

'That was the very reason——' began Ronnie, but Mrs. Cotton had once more intervened, almost as if she were anxious to save him even from the most candid of white lies.

'It is a relief to me that you *have* seen the—the article. I wonder if you would be very much surprised, Mr. Forbes, or whether perhaps you will think me ungracious, if I say that I didn't entirely approve of it. What are *your* feelings?'

The light-coloured eyes under the square brows never swerved by a hair's-breadth, while Ronnie at last managed to get in his reply.

'You mean, of course,' he said, 'Cyril Charlton? Well, quite candidly, Mrs. Cotton, and I can say it without the faintest vestige of disloyalty, for I haven't the pleasure of knowing Mr. Charlton, I thought his paper was amateurish and superficial. He is a critic of sorts, of course; and I have no doubt he—he meant well. But, how shall I say it?—the whole thing was so fumbling and uncertain. He didn't seem to——'

'In some respects,' Mrs. Cotton interjected, rounding

her eye at him as inquiringly as might a robin perched on a sexton's shovel, 'in some respects hardly "*uncertain*", surely?'

'Oh, you mean in the facts,' said Ronnie.

'I mean in the facts,' said Mrs. Cotton. 'I am not suggesting that Mr. Charlton was anything but perfectly polite and, if one may say so, plausible, though I use the word in no damaging sense, of course. He knew my son's poems, I won't say by heart, but certainly by rote. He sat where you sit now and quoted them to me. Stanza after stanza, as if they had just been dug up out of the grave, as I understand Mr. Rossetti's were. As if I had never read a line of them myself. He was, he assured me, profoundly interested in literature, "profoundly". He was astonished, seemed genuinely astonished, at the thought that so few lovers of poetry—his own words—had even so much as heard of my son's books. A fair, rather silly-looking young man; with a cheek like a girl's. I couldn't have conceived such fluency possible. He talked and talked. That, of course, was exceedingly nice of him and, so far as it went, reassuring. But, believe me, Mr. Forbes, he almost took my breath away. I said to myself, here is a young man whose zeal has outrun his good sense, and *therefore*, of course, I gave him all the help I could. Such overflowing, such disarming enthusiasm —what harm could there be in that?'

Ronnie tried hard to prevent his face from showing the smallest change of expression while he hastily masticated this question. In these domestic surroundings, ordinary enough in some respects but startlingly novel in others, it was so difficult to be certain what degree of irony this rather formidable lady intended. And at whose expense? Ten years ago: yet still the very accents of that flaxen ass of a Charlton seemed to be haunting these

green recesses! Ronnie became so horribly tongue-tied at last that he felt a blush mounting up into his cheek—as he sat mutely on, seeking inspiration and finding none in the view from the French windows.

The lawn beyond had been recently mown. Its daffodils stood as motionless in their clusters as if they had been drugged by the sunshine. In a looping flash of blue a tom-tit alighted for an instant on the dangling coco-nut shell in the verandah, glanced in from its reptilian blunt little head at Ronnie, and with a flutter of wing posted off again. And still he could think of nothing to say.

Meanwhile, it seemed, Mrs. Cotton, by no means expecting an answer, had been steadily engaged in taking him in. Her slightly mannish and astringent voice again broke the silence.

'We have used the word "facts", Mr. Forbes,' she suavely invited him. 'Tell me what—in that absurd account of my son's early years—amused you most?'

'Quite frankly?' Ronnie, suddenly refreshed, turned quickly about and met her eyes. 'Well, quite frankly, Mrs. Cotton, that he had died in Trinidad. I felt morally certain that *that* was, well,' he shrugged his shoulders, 'fiddlededee.'. . .

The rather frog-like ageing face had not faltered at this intimate reference, and Ronnie at once pressed on.

'Trinidad, first. And next, the fantastic little account of how while he was still only an infant in arms he used to dance in his nurse's lap at the window during a thunderstorm and clap his hands at the lightning. It wasn't so much the thing in itself, but simply Charlton's namby-pamby way of putting it. It simply wasn't true, and had been cribbed of course from Coleridge. Or was it Walter Scott? Oh, a host of things.'

What resembled a merry but not very resonant peal of laughter had greeted this burst of scepticism.

'I see,' cried Mrs. Cotton, still laughing, 'but *why* did you conclude—Trinidad?'

Ronnie had begun to breathe a little more freely again.

'Why, don't you see, things surely, even apart from words, are true—right, I mean—only in their appropriate setting. The thunderstorm at the nursery window (even though he didn't say lattice or casement), manifestly wasn't. It wasn't in the *picture*, or rather—to put it exactly opposite to that—it was just what a writer like Cyril Charlton would be bound to say, when once he had started on that kind of thing. He led himself on. Just roses, roses all the way; and nothing to show that he knew one variety from another. He *meant* well, oh yes. But there is simply no bottom to the abyss of mere blague into which such a sentimentalist can sink. Oh, I think you can rely on me in that. As a matter of fact'—it was a bold move Ronnie felt in the circumstances, but he risked it—'it was chiefly *because* of—of all this that I ventured to inflict myself upon you to-day. Trinidad! It was to say the least of it so idiotically inartistic. I almost burst out laughing at thought of it on my way from the station. And what adorable country!'

But Mrs. Cotton ignored the enticing compliment.

'And yet, Mr. Forbes,' she was saying, and much more thoughtfully than the truism seemed to warrant, 'Trinidad or no Trinidad, I suppose we all have to die somewhere. Nor did I realize there was anything "inartistic" in his saying that. To me it was merely untrue. It *may* have been my mentioning that my husband was at *Trinity* led him astray; but even at that—well, it was so completely out of the blue. Even, too, if Trinidad *had* been the—the scene of my son's death, what then?'

But for the life of him, Ronnie couldn't blurt out the question that had at once offered itself. He merely went on listening.

And for a moment Mrs. Cotton watched him doing so. 'But since', she pressed on, 'you have used that particular word—"inartistic", I mean—do please enlighten me. What kind of people really enjoy Mr. Charlton's kind of writing? It was more or less new to *me* at the time; but I have noticed since then that though his performance was a little sillier than most, it was quite in the new fashion. Nowadays one has only to write a book, it seems, to make even one's kitchen cat an animal worth adorning a newspaper with. And not merely literary men but quite young actresses, apart from soaps and cigarettes and cosmetics and that sort of thing, are invited, almost as a matter of course apparently, by editors of newspapers who must be quite intelligent men, to air their views on marriage, or the soul, or a future life—on *that* sort of thing. Quite as a matter of course. Do you think it much helps?'

Ronnie gallantly met her eye. 'Whom?' he said.

'Ah, who? I was thinking myself of what is called the "man in the street" and the women under his roof. But then, I suppose, there have always been a few talkative sillies in the world who completely underestimate the common-sense of people in general. Or is it getting old, Mr. Forbes, that makes the sillies of one's latter days seem a little sillier than usual. My own small view is that life may be tragic and sorrowful enough in the long-run —and for the young actresses, too, poor things; they've much to lose: but that it isn't—well, just Trinidad and thunderstorms. There may be things, I mean, better left unsaid.'

Ronnie stirred in his chair. He hadn't intended this little turn to the talk. 'Exactly,' he agreed. 'Still you

wouldn't suggest even Cyril Charlton meant to be as bad as all that?'

'Be fair to me, Mr. Forbes. Haven't I already confessed that I thought him an almost entirely harmless-looking young man. "Meant to be", indeed! I doubt if he was conscious of so much as brushing the down off a butterfly's wing. Yet, would you believe it, my brother, Major Winslow, at that time in India, was inclined, though not for my son's sake only, to take more drastic steps. It was only with the greatest difficulty that I persuaded him not to consult his lawyer.'

Yet again a curiously muffled and not quite unjangled peal of little bells sounded between the walls. Mrs. Cotton had laughed. And at sound of it a remote, fiery, defiant gleam had flamed up and vanished in Ronnie's brown eye.

'If I may venture to say so,' he said stoutly, 'I think that course would have been as ill-advised as it would have been ineffective.'

Mrs. Cotton graciously beamed at him. 'I am delighted to hear you say so,' she assured him. 'Those were, I believe, almost the precise words I used in my reply to Major Winslow. Idle nonsense of that sort, however shallow and however false, is *not* libellous. And—whether or not *after* actual consultation with his lawyer, I cannot say—he came round in the end to our way of looking at it. Poor Mr. Charlton! I can see him in the witness-box! But I referred to Major Winslow merely as an example of what I suppose would be called the Philistine view of Mr. Charlton's form of entertainment. My brother's and mine. What is more, I am entrusting these little confidences to your ear alone, simply because even if we neither of us have any particular friendliness for this young man, we don't bear him any ill-will. So far as I am concerned, he can be left to stew in his own juice.' Mrs. Cotton

nearly doubled her substantial shape in two as she leaned forward in her chair to insist on this vulgarism.

'You see,' she hurried on, 'I am taking it for granted that *you* are really interested in my son's work, and would be far more severe on some of Mr. Charlton's shortcomings—the artistic ones, for instance—even than I should be myself: his own mother, I mean. But tell me, has this young American friend of whom you speak any intention of *publishing* his thesis? If so, I hope I may be allowed to see it. Or is it to be a little private venture undertaken solely with the intention of keeping to the poems and of putting Mr. Charlton *right*?'

For a moment or two Ronnie pondered both these questions. They seemed to be equally crucial and dangerous. Ponder, alas! when he could hardly hear himself think, so loud were his inward execrations of the young friend in question. *Solely* with the intention of putting that silly, precious, sentimental ass of a C.C. right!—he could picture the young post-graduate's exultant grin at such an opportunity, even to the glinting gold of his exquisite 'dentures'. He gave a sharp impatient tug at his hardly less exquisite Bond Street trousering, and briskly crossed his legs.

'Publication *was* his intention,' he replied, 'and not merely to do as you suggest.' But he wished the accents in which he had uttered this confession had not sounded as if he were a company promoter apologizing for a balance sheet.

'In other words, Mr. Forbes, I am to understand, then, that your visit to me to-day is not solely with a view to the success of this young man's university studies? You, too, have come to see me—not, of course, on your own behalf, but in kindness to your friend—in order to glean what you can of my son's personal and private affairs?'

The challenge was unmistakable. It rang out like a trumpet, and Ronnie could neither smile now nor reply. He moistened his lips. Though of late years more and more easily bored, he was still interested in human nature. The poet's mother had proved to be of a type he seldom encountered even on the outskirts of his ordinary orbit. He dearly enjoyed, too, a battle of wits. But this was hardly 'wits', and he was as yet uncertain exactly where he himself was likely to remain—on which side of the fence, that is. All he could blurt out at last sounded much less pacifying than he intended to make it.

'You will forgive me', he said, 'if I don't entirely agree with you. I mean on the principle of the thing. Surely, Mrs. Cotton, the publication of a book implies that the author of it is to that degree sharing himself with the world at large. Poetry in particular. He puts into print what he wouldn't confide in secret even to his closest friend. It is a confessional wide as the heavens! Within certain limits, then, isn't the world at large justified in being interested not merely in him as a writer but as a human being? I agree that this can go too far, that it usually does, in fact. Mere prying curiosity is odious. And there's no need to be vulgar. But how can one separate entirely a man from his work, and especially if the *one* one *is*, as it were, explanatory of the other? Besides'—he took the fence that offered itself in one sprightly bound—'one doesn't have to be a Paul Pry to be grateful, say, for William Shakespeare's second-best bed.'

Mrs. Cotton smoothed down her unmodishly long skirts over her lap. She, too, paused with stooping head, as if listening, or as if her thoughts had wandered. Then once again she openly faced him.

'In a moment or two I shall be ready and perfectly willing, Mr. Forbes,' she assured him, 'to answer *any*

question you like to ask me. I won't say that I agree either in principle or in detail with what you have said. And—though I can only guess how dreadfully ignorant it must sound—I know nothing whatever about William Shakespeare's second-best bed. Weren't beds very expensive in those days? I seem to have read that somewhere. But all this apart, I should like to consider you, if I may, not only as a confidant, but as a friend. That being so, first, I propose to make a little private confession. Please listen to me as patiently as you can.'

All Ronnie's native gallantry had mounted into his head at this appeal. For the first time for years he was the victim of an enlarged heart. He composed himself to listen.

'You must realize in the first place that I know very little *about* books and nothing whatever about poetry. I am not even a great reader; indeed if I were, that would be quite another question. Poetry is not in me, it is not in *my* family. As a child I detested it, the very word. I was therefore made to learn as much of it as a stupid governess could make me. I see myself at this moment, with tear-grimed cheeks and nose flattened to my nursery window, looking out on a world of rain and wind, and some thumbed, dog's-eared, horrid little book of poetry clutched in my grubby paw, containing not only poems, mind, definitely intended to do me good, but such famous pieces as "Piping down the valleys wild", and "The Assyrian came down". That kind of thing. Well, I hated them *all* with an almost physical hatred. Which merely means, I suppose, that even as a child I was of a practical and matter-of-fact turn of mind. But that, I believe, is true of many young children. As we are, so we remain; at least in deficiency of mind: it is a dreadful consideration, Mr. Forbes. Whether interest in poetry and in works of the imagination would ever have been mine in

happier circumstances I cannot say. I can only confess that it never has. My husband was precisely the opposite, and my son, spared, in his childhood at least, the thorns and thistles which the little donkey that I used to be discovered in what I was fed on, took after him.

'I have heard of mothers, Mr. Forbes, who have been jealous of the love and intimacy between a child and its father. That's beyond my understanding. But when my husband died, I was for many years my son's only real company. You can be delicate in spirit as well as in body —a delicacy, I mean, that is none the less the very reverse of weakness. So, you see, as time went on, he was practically compelled to confide in *me*. Apart from the craving to express oneself—though that, too, is not in me—little though you may be supposing it just now!—there is the craving to share what comes of it, afterwards. I can understand that. And though I could listen with all my heart and soul, to *share* I could only pretend. My son soon realized this, though I hid it from him as much as I could.

'Yet I tried—believe me, Mr. Forbes, I honestly tried —to educate, to force myself into his way of thinking. You'd be vastly amused to hear how much poetry I have read solely with that end in view, and almost always with complete unsuccess.'

A sudden unbosoming smile swept over her face, like a burst of sunshine over corn-shocks at harvest-tide. 'If I go on like this,' she broke off, 'you will be suspecting that I think it is *my* confessions you are after!'

Ronnie greeted this sally as amply as he knew how, inwardly speculating the while how it came about that with so easy and bountiful a field to glean Cyril Charlton had carried off so mingy a sheaf. Why, even a raw reporter. . . ! But Mrs. Cotton was hastening on.

'Egotist or not,' she was saying, 'I toiled on at my task, and at least became a little more capable of realizing the force and the strain of my son's secret idolatry. There was only one thing in the world for him—poetry. At first I believe he hadn't the faintest desire or intention to share this craving with any other human being except his father. Afterwards, I happened to be there, and—there wasn't anybody else. And though I had fallen far short of any true appreciation, I had become aware of two things: first, that there *is* such a thing as poetry, and next, that I had a pretty shrewd notion of what poetry *isn't*.

'Poetry, Mr. Forbes, as I have tried to understand it,' —she waved her hand towards the window—'is all *there*, just waiting for us. But it won't necessarily show itself at call or even at need. *Un paysage est un état de l'âme*; and so of poetry. One must—am I right?—have the mind, the sense, the spirit within—to invoke it. *That* I realize. It is a way of looking at things, a way of feeling about them, almost of being them—a way of *living*. And it is, I suppose—you will let me go groping on—as inseparable, if you *have* that particular sense and insight—as inseparable, I say, from the world at large and everything in it as its scent is from a flower. And no *more* inseparable either, for just as you can extract its scent from a flower and shut it up in a bottle, so you can extract the poetry from the life around and within you and put it into words and them into a book. *Is* that so? Am I even in the right direction?' She stooped towards her silent visitor as if her very life might depend upon his answer—an answer that none the less failed to come. 'Well, I am being dreadfully clumsy, dreadfully commonplace. But I believe all that as surely, though maybe as gropingly, as a blind man believes that there is such a thing as light.

'Yet the thing itself is hidden from me, shut out from me. Try as I may, I cannot grasp or share it. On the one side my son, almost coldly conscious, I might say, of these volcanic feelings, pursuing this strange mystery, this mirage, eating his heart out, never satisfied, ready to sacrifice anything, everything, for its sake; and on the other, myself—stuttering and pretending, but so far as heart and soul are concerned, absolutely as dumb and insensitive as a fish.

'In spite of this, he was always generosity itself to me, though I knew that if the worst ever came to the worst even a mother would have to be sacrificed on that altar. But at last, as you know, his poems were published. Published.'

The rather flat yet mobile face had cleared at the word as if, for the moment at least, these riddles and perplexities were over, as if she had steered clear of the reefs. 'You will be amused to hear that I myself arranged all that: the printing, the paper, the binding—*his* final choice, of course. I saw the publisher, a Mr. Crown, in London, again and again, and settled *everything*—expenses, advertising, commission, everything. He, too, in spite of his dingy little office and a *very* extraordinary secretary, seemed to be a most enthusiastic admirer of poetry, though, as I have since discovered—and here Mr. Charlton could give me surprisingly little information—I was treated on severely business-like principles. Indeed between ourselves, Mr. Forbes, I soon began to suspect not merely this gentleman's enthusiasm but, well, his honesty also. So far eventually as our little book was concerned it might just as well, on his side, have been soap or sugar!

'The critics, on the other hand—though I was unable to follow all that they said, which was not, of course, at

great *length*—were exceedingly kind. I don't mean that they were more than just—how could I? They were exceedingly kind. Some thirty copies of the book, I was given to understand, were sent to the newspapers, and about eight were sold. But apart from the bills I paid I have never had any particulars. For the time being my son found a good deal of happiness in his venture. And then I think the merely practical side of it began to bother him a little. He fancied that we, that I, had been dreadfully cheated. I had gone off to this Mr. Crown, I should have mentioned, without my son's knowledge. But it wasn't so much the money involved—though I happened to learn afterwards he did *not* pay fees for the reviews—it was—well, I suppose, the humiliation. My son was grieved and ashamed at what such things come to. He had been kept by his father, for his own sake perhaps, too long out of the world to realize its sense of proportion. Nevertheless, he went on writing. But with more and more difficulty. A dreadful despair seemed to have come over him. He shunned everyone. He had been—mortally—wounded. But I, even then, was powerless to help him. We know so little of what is passing in any other mind—even those nearest to us. And then—at last. . . . Well, there is no need to go into that.'

She had paused again, and the pair of them, so far as their eyes were concerned, seemed to be like two funereal birds hovering over some morsel which neither of them had much appetite for—though it was part of God's plenty—and which it was hardly in the nature of things that they should be able to *share*. Nevertheless Ronnie was conscious rather of a void than of any very definite dainty, and he could only blink.

But the pause had come at an opportune moment. So hot and airless was the low-pitched room in which they

sat, so heavy the odour of the flowers around them, that but a few instants before, though his gaze had remained fixed on Mrs. Cotton's face, his glazing orbs from sheer sleepiness had actually rocked in his head. Now he was wide awake again; and he had need to be, for Mrs. Cotton was hastening on.

'To our second venture, as you may be aware, Mr. Forbes, the critics were less kind. They, too, couldn't fully understand what my son was after, though better than I could. Could *you*?'

At this her visitor's round and somewhat fresh-coloured face perceptibly paled. Yet again the trumpet had sounded. For a breath he hesitated, and then bolted the lump that had come into his throat. 'I don't know the poems well enough to say,' he said.

Mrs. Cotton turned away. 'Well, I am grateful to you for *that*,' was her unexpected retort. But her voice had trailed off a little as if from some inward rather than from any mere physical fatigue.

'That being so, you will the more readily realize, then,' she continued, 'that when, after the publication of my son's second book—which was, as a matter of fact, destined to be his last—it became clear to me that even those who are supposed to understand such things were unable to follow him, to grasp his meaning, to share even his *intention*—when I saw that *so far* he had absolutely failed, it was a very bitter grief to me. Not for my own sake, though what mother is not *practically* ambitious for her children?—but for his. I had realized you see—and it is here that I hope you will be most patient with me and will forgive me if I repeat myself—I had realized that to some minds and to some spirits poetry is what religion is to others—the most precious, the most certain, the most wanted thing life has to give. And now

that he had fallen silent I could at least realize too if only in part the affliction it meant to him. Not that, because he was silent, the beauty and meaning—the divination—of life were gone *too*. Not that; surely not that! That would be such a lie as no Cyril Charlton even is capable of. It was still there—within him; between himself and his Maker.

'I once came across somewhere a passage in a book—I can't remember its title or even its author, but being eager and interested as I was then, it stamped itself on my memory: "He that has never seen this beauty must hunger for it as for all his welfare, he that has known it must love and reverence it as the very beauty; he will be flooded with awe and gladness." Well, surely, even if it be averred that these early hopes and desires were nothing but a fool's paradise—and *that* I refuse to believe; and even though you may regret the folly, still you cannot deny that to my son they *were* a paradise? No more then would I deny the hope of its continuance, though the gates should be shut for ever that gave others a glimpse of it.' She paused, her small square hands clenched in her lap.

'I have finished, Mr. Forbes. As you see, I live here a quiet and retired life. I believe that no good thing in this world—since it is a world founded on divine reason—can be eventually wasted. I believe therefore that whatever there is of this infinite grace in my son's poems will find in time its own haven, even though they may be completely forgotten here on earth. Meanwhile I keep my lesson. Cyril Charlton, and much else that I won't burden you with, taught me at any rate once and for all that there is a danger worse than death to this "very beauty", and that it comes, not from the enemies, but from these so-called "*lovers*" of poetry—these parasites

—their jealousies, their quarrels, their pretences, their petty curiosity, their suffocating silliness. I will have none of it. I am determined—determined that this precious "world-at-large"—your own words—shall leave my son and all he loved and the dreams from which there is now no waking, at *peace*. His memory, himself, safe here with me; to the end.'

She had risen from her chair as she finished speaking. With hands clutched on her bodice, her small pupils glinting like semi-precious stones, she stood over poor Ronnie, and dared him to do his worst. There were tears in the eyes now challenging him, tears, he realized, not of weakness but of strength, and squeezed out of a spirit, stable as adamant, which would not swerve by an inch if the need came to stride off exulting to the stake.

And as, not apparently in any desire for air, and certainly not for retreat, but merely to conceal her feelings —and maybe from herself—Mrs. Cotton turned her back on her visitor and marched over to the French windows, Ronnie stirred awkwardly in his chair. The attitude in which he had been listening to this prolonged declamation had become a little strained. He stirred—as if he were 'coming to'. And, 'What the devil,' he was thinking ruefully, if a little vacantly, 'what the devil had he or his young American friend to do with any "*stake*"!'

The windows had been flung open to their fullest gape. The tepid April air of the garden thinned in on the boxed-up atmosphere. It pierced with its sweet earthy freshness the pent-in odours of the forced flowers. Ronnie breathed and breathed again. The drowsy cadences of a blackbird from some shrubbery out of view fell on his ear like waterdrops into the basin of a fountain. And then suddenly from quite near at hand resounded the

sudden shrill battle-cry—incredibly defiant, even formidable, for a creature so minute—of a wren.

Mrs. Cotton had paused, her hand on the window-frame, only, it seemed, to regain her self-possession. She turned at last, and with a gesture waved as it were all these last few confidences between them aside.

'So you see, Mr. Forbes,' she said, 'now that I have said what I have said, and it has not been an easy task, I must resign the rest to you. You will forget any resentment I may have shown. But as I look back on Mr. Charlton I find it difficult to be fair to him. I believed at the time that he at least meant well, that he had my son's reputation at heart only and solely because he himself really *cared* for poetry, whereas I. . . . What else can I do then but commit myself entirely into your hands? You have come this long distance. You are bound to consider your friend's interests. I feel then I must leave you absolutely at liberty to use your own judgment as to what shall be proclaimed on the housetops and what not. You have not supposed, at least, that I want what my son has done to be forgotten. Though its innermost secrets may be hidden from me, I can at least be aware that to other minds they *may* be very precious'. Her arms fell loosely to her sides. Even in youth her short, rather dumpy figure could never have been of any particular feminine grace; yet Ronnie was fated to remember that gesture. It had reminded him, absurdly enough, not of Velasquez's 'Surrender', but of a ballet dancer by Degas.

'And now'—she was almost timidly inviting him—'I hope you will stay and take tea with us—my daughter-in-law will join us presently.'

Ronnie dutifully murmured a word or two about trains, but she tossed them aside. 'You must let it be part of our compact,' she said, eying him almost archly but

with an ironic intentness. 'Meanwhile I must leave you for a moment.'

She paused at the door at which Ronnie had entered. 'The picture immediately behind you', she said, 'is a portrait of James when he was a child of seven. It was painted by an artist—an R.A.—who is now, I believe, out of fashion. But he was not so then. The old gentleman with the pug-dog in his lap next to it (a really good picture, I have been told), is my son's great-grandfather —on my husband's side. And in that album on the what-not you will find photographs and some pieces of manuscript. Please look at anything that may interest you.'

A moment afterwards the door had been firmly shut behind her, the sound of her footsteps had died away, and Ronnie was alone. He sat for a few moments perfectly still, his brown eyes fixed almost gloatingly on the garden. Then a sudden shuddering yawn overtook him. He knew how sleepy, but had not noticed how physically exhausted, he was. Heavens, what a labyrinth of a trap he had walked into! . . . But how amusing!

His glance strayed at last to the three-tiered galaxy of flowers on their white-painted shelves in the alcove—early geraniums, wax-like hyacinths, modest flowering musk, and, above all, the peach-like exotic freesia. Then he got up from his chair, yawned again as he turned about, took a pace or so backwards, and fixed his eyes on the portrait of the poet as a boy of seven.

The heavy gilt frame had woefully tarnished. But the brick red of the tartan kilt and plaid and the mustard yellow of the flaxen corkscrew curls that dangled from under a glengarry about the apple-cheeked, china-blue-eyed face had kept all their 'pristine bloom'. If the artist had ever really had his eye on his subject he had assuredly detected no symptom of genius there. The stolid little

boy that stood in the canvas *looked* about as intelligent as a bullfinch or a Dutch cheese. None the less—as though symbols will out—he stood armed, as if for mental fight, the point of his cross-hilted wooden toy sword poised straight out of the picture and full in the direction of Ronnie's stomach.

Ronnie was nothing if not critical—but less so of pictures than of elegant literature. He could easily manage to swallow 'Cherry Ripe' and even 'Bubbles', but there was something in the technique of this particular painter that raised his gorge. Indeed the portrait was damnably unfair—on the part of the painter. For, after all, if there *was* a remarkable feature in the verse that little James had lived to make obscure, it was its technical mastery. 'Mental fight', then, there must have been. 'You can't,' Ronnie adjured the child in the picture a little wearily—'you can't build any sort of Jerusalem anywhere without it, and certainly not in that rather less green and, in places, positively unpleasant land that England had rapidly been becoming since you, my poor innocent, were seven!'

Of James's particular Jerusalem, none the less, he had only the vaguest intimations. He would look it up again perhaps when he got back to London. He might even attempt to worm his way into its secret citadel. But now, anyhow, there was no need to worry about it. He was tired. Poetry of that kind is all very well while you are young and active, and the trailing clouds haven't completely shredded off. 'But, heavens!' Ronnie inwardly ejaculated again, as he continued to gaze at this infant Samuel in tartan, 'give *me* his mamma every time.' Typically English too, almost British, in her own queer way, and overwhelmingly worth writing even to America about. How his young friend would lap her up! And the subtlety of it all!

The female spider was, of course, notorious not only for its voracity but its astuteness. They even devoured their many husbands. Mrs. Cotton had put down, it seemed, every single card in her hand face upwards on the bright green table; and Ronnie had lost—every single trick! She had hopelessly queered his pitch. And yet, as he had sat there, transfixed by those small glittering eyes, a warm (and rather un-Ronnieish) camaraderie had sprung up in his mind. Affection at first sight!

His glance drifted down from the portrait to a full-length photograph that stood in an old leather frame on the Pembroke table immediately beneath it. He stooped and looked closer. Yes, it was without any doubt a photograph of James's mother herself and one taken at about the same date as that of the picture. Square and plump and substantial in figure even then; in a neat tight-fitting bodice and flounced flow-away skirts, she stood there, one small shapely hand on a Victorian 'occasional' chair, looking as straight and decisively out at the camera as her son at his R.A. And the camera had been kinder than the painter. The wide open face was smiling; there was an almost audacious sparkle of coquetry in the eyes; and even Ronnie's worldly-wise but still susceptible masculine heart responded to this charming feminine challenge.

Indeed, he was still intent on the photograph—the album and the excellent portrait of the smiling, skull-capped old gentleman with the pug-dog on his lap having been completely ignored—when at the same moment he heard voices from far within, and the clink of teacups near at hand. When the parlourmaid entered the room with her salver he was seated on his chair again, a green-bound Moxon Tennyson in his hand, opened at 'Mariana', but upside down. . .

In the talk during the meal that followed—and Ronnie failed even to nibble at the scone on his plate until it was stone cold—the elder Mrs. Cotton took little part. The two ladies sat opposite to him, while, with his back to the door, and on a stiff barley-sugar-legged prie-dieu chair, he himself faced the little warrior in the portrait. In spite, however, of the hypnotic power of that infantile blue eye, Mrs. James Cotton easily held her own. She was almost embarrassingly tall and dark and flat—a tall dark flattishness accentuated rather than enhanced by the black dress she was wearing and the necklace of jet that dangled round her neck beneath a prolonged chin. Still, black against cucumber green is not an unpleasing contrast, and though (as Ronnie was thinking), this countenance was more sombre and equine in its contours even than that of the aged William Wordsworth, she was soon prattling away as if the only marvel were that circumstances had kept them so long apart.

She was enraptured and earnest and astonished and coy all in the same breath. She assured him again and again how much she adored the country and how beautiful Nature was in the spring. One of her very favourite seasons of the year—everything so fresh, so verdant, 'so full of lafe, Mr. Forbes. And yet just the same—year in, year out!' Why, if you closed your eyes and listened to the birds, or opened them and looked at the flowers, they might both be exactly the same ones as you had seen *last* Spring and the one before that and the one before that!

'As if, Mr. Forbes, there had been *no* winter in between!'

But, of course, that *couldn't* be so, that was only a fancy. Besides, it was just the reverse. Absolutely. What a perfectly dreadful winter they had had, to be sure: so cold, so gloomy, so protracted. 'I can't like the winter, Mr.

Forbes, I can't indeed.' Besides, he must remember, she cried almost with elation, 'we haven't any theatres here, or concert halls, or picture galleries. Not one. That's where London is so different to the country, and especially in winter, and even in the spring, too.' And London seemed to have been gayer than ever these last few months. So many society *functions*. She had read of them in the newspapers. Newspapers were a great resource, of course, though not the same as taking part in the functions themselves. Oh, no! At least not quite the same. And how the world changed!

Ronnie said, 'Certainly,' when the opportunity offered, and 'But I do indeed, really,' though it wasn't in the least necessary.

'You see,' she was repeating yet again, as she peeped for the fourth time into the cream-jug in case Mrs. Cotton had forgotten whether it was empty or not, 'one is so *removed* from things hidden away here in the country—though the country, of course, as I say, *is* the country after all—that I sometimes positively pine to see a policeman!'

She lowered her long head, gazed out of her dark mournful eyes at him, and giggled.

And the sun was wheeling lower and lower into the west, and a thrush had followed the blackbird on to the concert platform, and the flowers in the pots were continuing to unfurl—Ronnie had seen with precisely how pertinacious yet gentle a motion on the movies. But though a machine may accelerate or slow up the appearances of life, man's consciousness is as obedient as her flowers to the pace set by Nature. A fact which Mrs. Cotton, senior, was herself demonstrating as she munched steadily on, her eyes never now meeting his own, her only share in this sprightly conversation an occasional nod, or

a 'Thank you, Emma,' or a prompt hand outheld (and again and again, for Ronnie's thirst was extreme), for his empty cup, or an impatient flick of her fingers at the crumbs in her lap.

'I was so delated to hear', said Emma at last, 'that you are an admirer of my husband's poetry.'

'Indeed I *am*,' cried Ronnie, in a voice that even in his own ear sounded as hollow as a tub.

'And yet, do you know, Mr. Forbes, I am sure it must be *ages* since I have seen any mention of him in the newspapers. But then you don't even see Lord Tennyson's name mentioned very much now. Do you?'

She glanced a little uneasily at her mother-in-law, but only for a moment; her dark uncertain gaze had immediately settled on their visitor again.

'He hasn't been dead long enough,' broke in Mrs. Cotton abruptly.

'No,' Ronnie retorted with spirit, in the forlorn hope of wooing her into the talk, 'that's just the very point. I was only saying . . .'

But at this moment, though he had been conscious of no interruption, the door behind him seemed to have opened, for the two ladies had simultaneously raised and fixed their eyes on something or somebody behind him and out of his view. It must have been the parlour-maid, for though for the moment a curious transfixedness had spread over Mrs. Cotton's features, and her daughter-in-law looked positively alarmed, as soon as the door had been as softly shut again, Emma, after yet another glance at Mrs. Cotton, had instantly begun talking away again at Ronnie with an almost galvanic zest, and apparently with less intention than ever of waiting for his replies.

'I do so *hope*,' she said, when Ronnie rose at last to make his adieux, 'I do so hope that if you *should* compose

anything in print about my husband, you will let me see it, Mr. Forbes. Just *Willows*, near *Ashenham*, would always find me; the postman knows us; and I should be so very interested to hear what is being thought now about books, and things like that. For being, as I say, in the country as we are, we . . .'

Her voice trailed away. The long pale lids of her aggrieved eyes had flickeringly descended, and Mrs. Cotton had at last and finally hastened into the breach. She, too, had risen, and had given a decisive tug at the flowered china bell-handle beside the fireplace.

'Good-bye, Mr. Forbes,' she said, as abandoning 'Emma', black as a rook on the green of the velvet sofa, she firmly grasped his hand. 'Good-bye. It has been an absorbing afternoon. And yet I'm afraid. . . .' They had reached the door; parting was imminent; and she sighed out her regret in so low a voice it seemed it must have been intended for Ronnie's ear alone, and his inward ear, too—'I'm afraid I must have seemed very remiss. If only I had been a little more accustomed to being interviewed! No pencil, no note-book! And now it is too late. Still,' she smiled at him, 'not only am I convinced you have a far better memory for such things than Mr. Charlton—whom I must say the two of us have treated *very* harshly—but there is nothing which I feel I could not have securely—securely confided to your keeping. Or in the future either—if the need should ever come.'

The memorable voice had broken a little at these last few words, and Ronnie gazed back with all his soul into the small grey-green eyes that seemed to have darkened now that her face was no longer in the light of the window.

'Thank you very much indeed for that, Mrs. Cotton,' he cried gallantly. 'You may rely on me. I assure you. I will be discretion itself!'

The stiff maidservant was already awaiting him. He seized his hat, his cane, his light overcoat, and turned; for, as he expected, Mrs. Cotton's steady regard was still fixed on him from the drawing-room door. They exchanged what seemed to Ronnie a last swift full glance of understanding, an intent, almost intimate glance that went even a little deeper into his mind than he could follow it. The next moment the door had been firmly closed behind him, and he was out in the open once more.

Huge billowy clouds, like enormous bolsters, had ranged themselves on the horizon beneath the infantile blue of the sky. Though the sun-bright dandelions that had greeted him were now raggedly shut for the night, the bladed grass, the leafy willows by the water's brim stood as if enchanted in an ocean of light and colour, and the air resounded with a mellay of song so wild and vehement that the birds that uttered it seemed to have been seized with an anguish of fear lest the dark to come should deprive them of every hope of ever singing again.

And Ronnie, too, was conscious of spring-time in his blood. He stepped out buoyantly and in uncommonly high spirits. What a hotchpotch of an afternoon, and yet on the whole how novel, how odd, and how very amusing!

In less than no time he had come almost to the turn in the weedy drive that would take him clean out of sight even of the upper windows of the house he had left behind him. But there his self-congratulations were suddenly interrupted. A low, clear, but mysterious hail had sounded in his rear. He wheeled about. These were not Mrs. Cotton's now familiar tones.

No, there could be no mistaking whence the summons had come. The straw-hatted, neatly clad figure of a tubby little man had emerged from under the trees to his

left, and was now—so extreme was his haste—almost trotting over the grass to intercept him. And Ronnie waited. Psychologists may maintain that it is humanly impossible to think of more than one thing at a time. But Ronnie knew better. Two perfectly distinct 'reactions' had at this moment flashed through his mind. One, the vivid recollection of Tenniel's Tweedledum and Tweedledee; the other the lightning conviction that he knew—that he seemed to have known for centuries, who precisely this little man *was*.

Ought he to fly? Surely, in spite of those last few words in the house, no such encounter as this had been included in the compact he had but just now signed and sealed with the poet's mother? But it was too late. Breathless, triumphant, the little man had caught him up. Bright blue eyes of an extraordinary intensity were surveying him from beneath arched brows under the brim of the antiquated black straw hat.

'I am speaking', the little man inquired with a charming courtesy, 'to . . .?'

'My name is Forbes,' said Ronnie.

'Ah, yes, Forbes. I was not aware of that, Mr. Forbes. Forgive me. I am kept a little in the dark. And better so, perhaps,' he smiled, 'for even in a place as remote as this and with very few visitors, you never know, do you . . .?' He faltered. 'At least, so I am told. But that said, or not said, as the case may be, I couldn't let this opportunity go by without—without, as a matter of fact, asking you to accept this. At times I find them crumpled up in the grass. But what can be expected of errand-boys? It is, and I hope'—he cast a furtive glance over his shoulder as he thrust a folded piece of paper that had apparently been torn from a tradesman's paper bag, into Ronnie's hand—'I hope you will let it be a little *private*

matter between us—it's in the nature of an epigram. My last.'

The candid blue eyes in the countenance on which it seemed age had decided to leave not one disfiguring mark became a little troubled as they searched Ronnie's smiling and aware face.

'You will agree, Mr. Forbes,' he pressed on earnestly, raising, like a bishop, his small white hand a little into the summer air, 'there are things—evidences, messages, that may be *shared*, though even the very meaning of the words may have become corrupted—decayed—*all rotted away*?'

It isn't always that any inmate is looking out of a human eye. But at this particular moment an exceedingly alert inmate, as keenly and austerely challenging as the gaze of an angel, was confronting Ronnie from the tranquil deeps of this little man's stare. His fingers fluttered an instant, as if inclined to snatch back what he had given.

'I must not distrust . . . I must leave it at that, Mr. Forbes,' he said hurriedly, raised his straw hat, and was gone.

Ronnie remained for a moment where he was, the paper in his hand. He, too, glanced over his shoulder. The house was still just in sight, nestling, with its willows, low in the gold of the western sun. But there was too much of a glare in the sky to be sure if any of its occupants were looking out after him from the upper windows.

He went on until he had come again to the narrow stone bridge over the stream. There he unfolded the poet's scrap of paper and scanned the four lines of tiny and almost illegible script it contained. He picked his way through them again and again and again; and there could be no doubt whatever at last of their intrinsic ob-

scurity. Worse, Ronnie had grave misgivings even of the soundness of their metrical technique. Not so the writer of them, apparently, for at the foot of the four lines which had been placed with extreme care in the very middle of the paper, there sprawled a long-looped, an almost Napoleonic *J.C.*

Baa, baa, sang out the woolly sheep on the other side of the green-springing hedge. But Ronnie paid no heed. He had instantly realized what a treasure for transatlantic academicism, or English either for that matter, he held in his hand. It was a fragment of holograph—of an unpublished poem—very late—in mint condition—recently signed with this said-to-be-deceased and unique minor poet's own initials!

He refolded this odd manuscript and placed it carefully in his pocket-book. Nor did he spend any more idle moments on the minnows in the brook beneath the bridge, but continued rapidly on his way to the railway station. Having there inquired for a later—and as it proved to be, its last—train back to London, the next being due in a few minutes, he set off for Ashenham itself.

The old woman in the little smelly village post office to whom he handed in his message to his young American friend had never heard of Wellspring, Ohio. By the deep look she gave Ronnie over her spectacles she seemed, indeed, for a moment to have supposed it was a piece of untimely jocularity. But she managed to produce at last an official *Guide*; and Ronnie, horn-rimmed spectacles on *his* fastidious but rather stubby nose, helped her all he could with the infinitesimal print. And to such effect that he all but charged himself twice the official rate *per* word. But lavish telegraphing was one of his many little weaknesses.

'*Have visited Willows*,' ran his ultimatum. '*Immensely*

sorry. Nothing doing. All gone. Am emphatically convinced only course to keep exclusively to text. Strongly advise complete abandonment of the ineffable Cyril. Heaven be with you. Writing. Ronnie Forbes.'

He then withdrew J. C.'s scrap of paper from his pocket-book and slipped it without any accompaniment into a stamped envelope—a little fly-blown—which the old lady supplied from a wooden drawer on the other side of the counter. On this he scribbled Mrs. Cotton's address, and having stuck it down, himself dropped it—with a sigh just nicely enough tinged with regret—into the little red box outside.

CREWE

When murky winter dusk begins to settle over the railway station at Crewe its first-class waiting-room grows steadily more stagnant. Particularly if one is alone in it. The long grimed windows do little more than sift the failing light that slopes in on them from the glass roof outside and is too feeble to penetrate into the recesses beyond. And the grained massive black-leathered furniture becomes less and less inviting. It appears to have been made for a scene of extreme and diabolical violence that one may hope will never occur. One can hardly at any rate imagine it to have been designed by a really *good* man!

Little things like this of course are apt to become exaggerated in memory, and I may be doing the Company an injustice. But whether this is so or not—and the afternoon I have in mind is now many years distant—I certainly became more acutely conscious of the defects of my surroundings when the few fellow-travellers who had been sharing this dreadful apartment with me had hurried out at the clang of a bell for the down train, leaving me to wait for the up. And nothing and nobody, as I supposed, but a great drowsy fire of cinders in the iron grate for company.

The almost animated talk that had sprung up before we parted, never in this world to meet again, had been occasioned by an account in the morning's newspapers

of the last voyage of a ship called the *Hesper*. She had come in the evening before, and some days overdue, with a cargo of sugar from the West Indies, and was now berthed safely in the Southampton Docks. This seemed to have been something of a relief to those concerned. For even her master had not refused to admit that certain mysterious and tragic events had recently occurred on board, though he preferred not to discuss them with a reporter. He agreed, even with the reporter, however, that there had been a full moon at the time, that, apart from a heavy swell, the sea was 'as calm as a mill-pond', and that his ship was at present in want of a second mate. But the voyage of the *Hesper* is now, of course, an old tale many times told. And I myself, having taken very little part in the discussion, had by that time wearied of her mysteries and had decided to seek the lights and joys and coloured bottles of the refreshment room when a voice from out of the murk behind me suddenly broke the hush. It was an unusual voice, rapid, incoherent and internal, like that of a man in a dream or under the influence of a drug.

I shifted my high-backed ungainly chair and turned to look. Evidently this, the only other occupant of the room, had until that moment been as unaware of my presence in it as I of his. Indeed he seemed to have been completely taken aback at finding he was not alone. He had started up from out of his obscure corner beyond the high window and was staring across at me out of his flat greyish face in unconcealed stupefaction. He seemed for a moment or two to be in doubt even of what I was. Then he sighed, a sigh that ended in a long shuddering yawn. 'I am sorry,' I said, 'I supposed——'

But he interrupted me—and not as if my company,

now that he had recognized me as a fellow creature, was any the less welcome for being unexpected.

'Merely what I was saying, sir,' he was mildly explaining, 'is that those gentlemen there who have just left us had no more notion of what they were talking about than an infant in the cradle.'

This elegant paraphrase, I realized, bore only the feeblest resemblance to the violent soliloquy I had just overheard. I looked at him. 'How so?' I said. 'I am only a landsman myself, but . . .'

It had seemed unnecessary to finish the sentence—I have never seen anyone less marine in effect than *he* was. He had shifted a little nearer and was now, his legs concealed, sitting on the extreme edge of his vast wooden sofa—a smallish man, but muffled up in a very respectable greatcoat at least two sizes too large for him, his hands thrust deep into its pockets.

He continued to stare at me. 'You don't have to go to sea for things like that,' he went on. 'And there's no need to argue about it if you do. Still it wasn't my place to interfere. They'll find out all right—all in good time. They go their ways. And talking of that, now, have you ever heard say that there is less risk sitting in a railway carriage at sixty miles an hour than in laying alone, safe, as you might suppose, in your own bed? That's true, too.' He glanced round him. 'You know where you are in a place like this, too. It's solid, though—' I couldn't catch the words that followed, but they seemed to be uncomplimentary to things in general.

'Yes,' I agreed, 'it certainly looks solid.'

'Ah, "looks",' he went on cantankerously. 'But what *is* your "solid", come to that? I thought so myself once.' He seemed to be pondering over the *once*. 'But now', he added, 'I know different.'

With that he rose and, dwarfed a little perhaps by the length of his coat, sallied out of his obscure corner beyond the high window and came to the fire. After warming his veined shrunken hands at the heap of smouldering cinders in the grate under the black marble mantelpiece —he seated himself opposite to me.

At risk of seeming fastidious, I must confess that now he was near I did not much care for the appearance of this stranger. He might be about to solicit a small loan. In spite of his admirable greatcoat he looked in need of a barber, as well as of medicine and sleep—a need that might presently exhibit itself in a hankering for alcohol. But I was mistaken. He asked for nothing, not even sympathy, not even advice. He merely, it seemed, wanted to talk about himself. And perhaps a complete stranger makes a better receptacle for a certain kind of confidences than one's intimates. He tells no tales.

Nevertheless I shall attempt to tell Mr. Blake's, and as far as possible in his own peculiar idiom. It impressed me at the time. And I have occasionally speculated since whether his statistics in relation to the risks of railway travel proved trustworthy. *Safety first* is a sound principle so far as it goes, but we are all of us out-manœuvred in the end. And I still wonder what end was his.

He began by asking me if I had ever lived in the country—'In the depps of the country'. And then, quickly realizing that I was more inclined to listen than talk, he suddenly plunged into his past. It seemed to refresh him to do so.

'I was a gentleman's servant when I began,' he set off; 'first boot-boy under a valet, then footman and helping at table, then pantry work and so on. Never married or anything of that; petticoats are nothing but encumbrances in the house. But I must say if you keep your-

self *to* yourself, it sees you through—in time. What you have to beware of is those of your own calling. Domestic. That's the same everywhere; nobody's reached much past the cat-and-dog stage in that. Not if you look close enough; high or low. I lost one or two nice easy places all on that account. Jealousy. And if you don't stay where you are put there's precious little chance of pickings when the funeral's at the door. But that's mostly changed, so I'm told; high wages and no work being the order of the day; and gratitude to follow suit. They are all rolling stones nowadays, and never mind the moss.'

As a philosopher this white-faced muffled-up old creature seemed to affect realism, though his reservations on the 'solid' had fallen a little short of it. Not that *my* reality appeared to matter much—beyond, I mean the mere proof of it. For though in the rather intimate memories he proceeded to share with me he frequently paused to ask a question, he seldom waited for an answer, and then ignored it. I see now this was not to be wondered at. We happened to be sharing at the moment this—for my part—chance resort and he wanted company—human company.

'The last situation I was in' (he was going on to tell me), 'was with the Reverend W. Somers, M.A.: William. In the depps of the country, as I say. Just myself, a young fellow of the name of George, and a woman who came in from the village to char and cook and so on, though I did the best part of that myself. The finishing touches, I mean. How long the Reverend hadn't cared for females in the house I never knew; but parsons have their share of them, I'm thinking. Not that he wasn't attached enough to his sister. They had grown up together, nursery to drawing-room, and that covers a multitude of sins.

'Like *him*, *she* was, but more of the parrot in appearance; a high face with a beaky nose. Quite a nice lady, too, except that she was mighty slow in being explained to. No interference, generally speaking; in spite of her nose. But don't mistake me; we had to look alive when she was in the house. Oh yes. But that, thank God, was seldom. And in the end it made no difference.

'She never took to the Vicarage. Who would? I can hear her now—Charles this, and Charles that. Too dark, too vaulty, too shut in. And in winter freezing cold, laying low maybe. Trees in front, everlastings; though open behind, with a stream and corn-fields and hills in the distance; especially in summer, of course. They went up and down, and dim or dark, according to the weather. You could see for miles from those upper corridor windows—small panes that take a lot of cleaning. But George did the windows. George had come from the village, too, if you could call it a village. But he was a permanency. Nothing much but a few cottages, and an outlying farmhouse here and there. Why the old brick church lay about a mile away from it, I can't say. To give the Roaring Lion a trot, perhaps. The Reverend had private means—naturally. I knew that before it came out in the will. But it was a nice fat living notwithstanding—worked out at about fifty pounds to the pig-sty, I shouldn't wonder, with the vicarage thrown in. You get what you've got in this world, and some of us enjoy a larger slice than we deserve. But the Reverend, I must say, never took advantage of it. He was a gentleman. Give him his books, and to-morrow like yesterday, and he gave no trouble—none whatever.

'Mind you, he liked things as they should be, and he had some of the finest silver I ever lay finger on; and old furniture to match. I don't mean furniture picked up at

sales and such like, but real old family stuff. That's where the parrot in the family nose came from. Everything punctual to the minute and the good things *good*. Soup or fish, a cutlet, a savoury, and a glass of sherry or madeira. No sweets—though he was a lean, spare gentleman, silvery beard and all. And I have never seen choicer fruit than came from his houses and orchard, though it was here the trouble began. Cherries, gages, peaches, nectarines—old red sun-baked walls nine or ten feet high and a sight like wonder in the spring. I used to go out specially to have a look at them. He had his fancies, too, had the Reverend. If any smoking was to be done it must be in the shrubbery with the blackbirds, not under the roof. And sitting there in his study, sir, he could detect the whiff of a cigarette even in the furthest of the attics!

'But tobacco's not *my* trouble, never was. Keep off what you don't need, and you won't want it when you can't get it. That's my feeling. It was, as I say, an easy place, if you forgot how quiet it was—not a sound, no company, and not a soul to be seen. Fair prospects, too, if you could wait. He had no fancy for change, had the Reverend; made no concealment of it. He told me himself that he had remembered me in his will—"if still in his service". You know how these lawyers put it. As a matter of fact he had given me to understand that if in the meantime for any reason any of us went elsewhere, the one left was to have the lot. But not death. *There*, as it turned out, I was in error.

'But I'm not complaining of that now. He was a gentleman; and I have enough to see me through however long I'm left. And that might be for a good many years yet.'

The intonation of this last remark suggested a ques-

tion. But my confidant made no pause for an answer and added argumentatively, 'Who *wants* to go, I should like to ask? Early *or* late. And nothing known of what's on the other side?' He lifted his grey eyebrows a little as if to glance up at me as he sat stooped up by the fire, and yet refrained from doing so. And again I couldn't enlighten him.

'Well, there, as I say, I might have stayed to this day if the old gentleman's gardener had cared to stay too. *He* began it. Him gone, we all went. Like ninepins. You might hardly credit it, sir, but I am the only one left of that complete establishment. Gutted. And that's where these fine gentlemen here were talking round their hats. What I say is, keep on this side of the tomb as long as you can. Don't meddle with that hole. Why? Because while some fine day you will have to go down into it, you can never be quite sure while you are here what mayn't come back out of it.

'*There'll be no partings there*—I have heard them trolling that out in them chapels like missel-thrushes in the spring. They seem to forget there may be some mighty unpleasant *meetings*. And what about the further shore? It's my belief there's some kind of a ferry plying on that river. And coming back depends on what you want to come back *for*.

'Anyhow the Vicarage reeked of it. A low old house, with lots of little windows and far too many doors; and, as I say, the trees too close up on one side, almost brushing the glass. No wonder they said it was what they call haunted. You could feel that with your eyes shut, and like breeds like. The Vicar—two or three, I mean, before my own gentleman—had even gone to the trouble of having the place exercised. Candles and holy water, that kind of thing. Sheer flummummery, *I* call it. But

if what I've heard there—and long before that gowk of a George came to work in the house—was anything more than mere age and owls and birds in the ivy, it must badly have needed it. And when you get accustomed to noises, you can tell which from which. By usual, I mean. Though more and more I'm getting to ask myself if any thing is anything much more than what you think it is—for the time being.

'Same with noises, of course. What's this voice of conscience that they talk about but something you needn't hear if you don't want to? I am not complaining of that. If at the beginning there was anything in that house that was better out than in, it never troubled me; at least, not at first. And the Reverend, even though you could often count his congregation on your ten fingers, except at Harvest Festival, was so wove up in his books that I doubt if he'd have been roused up out of 'em even by the Last Trump. It's my belief that in those last few weeks—when I stepped in to see to the fire—as often as not he was sitting asleep over them.

'No, I'm not complaining. Live at peace with who you can, I say. But when it comes to as crusty a customer, and a Scotchman at that, as was my friend the gardener, then there's a limit. Mengus he called himself, though I can't see *how*, if you spell it with a z. When I first came into the place it was all gold that glitters. I'm not the man for contentiousness, if let alone. But afterwards, when the rift came, I don't suppose we ever hardly exchanged the time of day but what there came words of it. A long-legged man *he* was, this Mr. Menzies; too long I should have thought for strict comfort in grubbing and hoeing and weeding. He had ginger hair, scanty, and the same on his face, whiskers—and a stoop. He lived down at the lodge; and his widowed

daughter kept house for him, with one little boy as fair as she was dark. Harmless enough as children go, the kind they call an angel but noisy, and not for the house.

'Now why, I ask you, shouldn't I pick a little of this gentleman's precious fruit, or a cucumber for a salad, if need be, and him not there? What if I wanted a few grapes for dessert or a nice apricot tart for the Reverend's luncheon, and our Mr. Menzies gone home or busy with the frames? I don't hold with all these hard and fast restrictions, at least outside the house. Not he, though! We wrangled about it week in, week out. And him with a temper which once roused was past all reasoning.

'Not that I ever took much notice of him until it came to a point past any man's enduring. I let him rave. But duty is duty, there's no getting away from that. And when, apart from all this fuss about his fruit, a man takes advantage of what is meant in pure friendliness, well, one's bound to make a move. Job himself.

'What I mean to say is, I used occasionally—window wide open and all that, the pantry being on the other side of the house and away from the old gentleman's study—I say I used occasionally, and all in the way of friendliness, to offer our friend a drink. Like as with many of Old Adam's trade, drink was a little weakness of his, though I don't mean I hold with it because of that. But peace and quietness is the first thing, and to keep an easy face to all appearances, even if you do find it a little hard at times to forgive and forget.

'When he was civil, as I say, and as things should be, he could have a drink, and welcome. When not, not. But it came to become a kind of habit; and to be expected; which is always a bad condition of things. Oh, it was a thousand pities! There was the Reverend, growing feeble as you could see, and him believing all the

while that everything around him was calm and sweet as the new Jerusalem, while there was nothing but strife and acrimony, as they call it, underneath. There's many a house looks as snug and cosy as a nut. But crack it and look inside! Mildew.

'Well, there came along at last a mighty hot summer —five years ago, you may remember. Five years ago, next August, an extraordinary hot summer. And an early harvest—necessarily. Day after day I could see the stones in the stubble fields shivering in the sun. And gardening is thirsty work; I will say that for it. Which being so, better surely virgin water from the tap or a drop of cider, same as the harvesters have, than ardent spirits, whether it is what you are bred up to or not! It stands to reason.

'Besides, we had had words again, and though I can stretch a point with a friend and no harm done, I'm not a man to come coneying and currying favour. Let him get his own drinks, was my feeling in the matter. And you can hardly call me to blame if he did. *There* was the pantry window hanging wide open in the shade of the trees—and day after day of scorching sun and not a breath to breathe. And there was the ruin of him within arm's reach from outside, and a water tap handy too. Very inviting, I'll allow.

'I'm not attesting, mind you, that he was confirmed at it, no more than that I'm a man to be measuring what's given me to take charge of by tenths of inches. It's the principle of the thing. You might have thought, too, that a simple honest pride would have kept him back. Nothing of the sort; and no matter, wine or spirits. I'd watch him there, though he couldn't see me, being behind the door. And practices like that, sir, as you will agree with me, can't go on. They couldn't go on, vicarage or no

vicarage. Besides, from being secret it began to be open. It had gone too far. Brazen it out: that was the lay. I came down one fine morning to find one of my best decanters smashed to smithereens on the stone floor, Irish glass and all. Cats and sherry, who ever heard of it? And out of revenge he filled the pantry with wasps by bringing in over-ripe plums. Petty waste of time like that. And some of the green-houses thick with blight!

'And so things went, from bad to worse, and at such a pace as I couldn't have credited. A widower, too, with a married daughter dependent on him; which is worse even than a wife, who expects to take the bad with the good. No, sir, I had to call a halt to it. A friendly word in his ear, or keeping everything out of his reach, you may be thinking, might have sufficed. Believe me, not for him. And how can you foster such a weakness by taking steps out of the usual to prevent it? It wouldn't be proper to your self-respect. Then I thought of George; not demeaning myself in any way, of course, in so doing. George had a face half as long as your arm, pale and solemn, enough to make a cat laugh. Dress him up in a surplice and hassock, he might have been the Reverend's curate. Strange that, for a youth born in the country. But curate or no curate, he had eyes in his head and must have seen what there was to be seen.

'I said to him one day, and I remember him standing there in the pantry in his black coat against the white of the cupboard paint, I said to him, "George, a word in time saves nine, but it would come better from you than from me. You take me? Hold your peace till our friend's sober again and can listen to reason. Then hand it over to him—a word of warning, I mean. Say we are muffling things up as well as we can from the old gentleman, but that if he *should* hear of it there'd be fat in the fire; and

no mistake. He would take it easier from you, George, the responsibility being mine."

'Lord, how I remember George! He had a way of looking at you as if he couldn't say *Boh* to a goose—swollen hands and bolting blue eyes, as simple as an infant's. But he wasn't stupid, oh no. Nobody could say that. And now I reflect, I think he knew our little plan wouldn't carry very far. But there, whatever he might be thinking, he was so awkward with his tongue that he could never find anything to say until it was too late, so I left it at that. Besides, I had come to know he was, with all his faults, a young man you could trust for doing what he was told to do. So, as I say, I left it at that.

'What he actually did say I never knew. But as for its being of any use, it was more like pouring paraffin on a bonfire. The very next afternoon our friend came along to the pantry window and stood there looking in—swaying he was, on his feet; and I can see the midges behind him zigzagging in a patch of sunshine as though they were here before my very eyes. He was so bad that he had to lay hold of the sill to keep himself from falling. Not thirst this time, but just fury. And then, seeing that mere flaunting of fine feathers wasn't going to inveigle *me* into a cockfight, he began to talk. No bad language, mind you—*that's* easy to shut your ears to—but cold reasonable abuse, which isn't. At first I took no notice, went on about my business at my leisure, and no hurry. What's the use of arguing with a man, and him one of these Scotchmen to boot, that's beside himself with rage? What was wanted was *peace* in the house, if only for the old gentleman's sake, who I thought was definitely under the weather and had been coming on very poorly of late.

'"Where's that George of yours?" he said to me at last—with additions. "Where's that George? Fetch

him out, and I'll teach him to come playing the holy Moses to my own daughter. Fetch him out, I say, and we'll finish it here and now." And all pitched high, and half his words no more English than the mewing of a cat.

'But I kept my temper and answered him quite moderate and as pleasantly as I knew how. "I don't want to meddle in *any*body's quarrels," I said. "So long as George so does his work in this house as will satisfy *my* eye, I am not responsible for his actions in his off-time and out of bounds."

'How was I to know, may I ask, if it was *not* our Mr. "Mengus" who had smashed one of my best decanters? What proof was there? What *reason* had I for thinking else?

' "George is a quiet, unbeseeming young fellow," I said, "and if he thinks it's his duty to report any misgoings-on either to me or to the Reverend, it doesn't concern anybody else."

'That seemed to sober my fine gentleman. Mind you, I'm not saying that there was anything unremidibly wrong with him. He was a first-class gardener. I grant you that. But then he had an uncommonly good place to match—first-class wages; and no milk, wood, coals or house-rent to worry about. But breaking out like that, and the Reverend poorly and all; that's not what he thought of when he put us all down in his will. I'll be bound of that. Well, there he stood, looking in at the window and me behind the table in my apron as calm as if his wrangling meant no more to me than the wind in the chimmeny. It was the word "report", I fancy, that took the wind out of his sails. It had brought him up like a station buffer. And he was still looking at me, and brooding it over, as though he had the taste of poison on his tongue.

'Then he says very quiet, "So that's his little game, is it? You are just a pair, then?"

' "If by pair you're meaning me," I said, "well, I'm ready to take on my share of the burden when it's ready to fit my back. But not before. George may have gone a bit beyond himself, but he meant well, and you know it."

' "What I am asking is this," says our friend, "have you ever seen me the worse for liquor? Answer me that!"

' "If I liked your tone better," I said, "I wouldn't say how I don't see why it would be necessarily the *worse*."

' "Ehh? You mean, Yes, then?" he said.

' "I mean no more than what I say," I answered him, looking at him over the cruet as straight as I'm looking at you now. "I don't ask to meddle with your private affairs, and I'll thank *you* not to come meddling with mine." He seemed taken aback at that, and I noticed he was looking a bit pinched, and hollow under the eyes. Sleepless nights, perhaps.

'But how was *I* to know this precious grandson of his was out of sorts with a bad throat and that—seeing that he hadn't mentioned it till a minute before? I ask you! "The best thing you and George there can do," I went on, "is to bury the hatchet; and out of hearing of the house, too."

'With that I turned away and went off into it myself, leaving him there to think things over at his leisure. I am putting it to you, sir, as a free witness, what else could I have done?'

There was little light of day left in our cavernous waiting-room by this time. Only the dulling glow of the fire and the phosphorescence caused by a tiny bead of gas in the 'mantles' of the great iron bracket over our heads.

My realist seemed to be positively in want of an answer to this last question. But as I sat looking back into his intent small face nothing that could be described as of a helpful nature offered itself.

'If he was anxious about his grandson,' I ventured at last, 'it might explain his being a little short in temper. Besides . . . But I should like to hear what came after.'

'What came after, now?' the little man repeated, drawing his right hand gingerly out of the depths of his pocket, and smoothing down his face with it as if he had suddenly discovered he was tired. 'Well, a good deal came after, but not quite what you might have expected. And you'd hardly go so far as to say perhaps that anxiety over his grandson would excuse him for what was little short of manslaughter, and him a good six inches to the good at that? Keeping facts as facts, if you'll excuse me, our friend waylaid George by the stables that very evening, and a wonderful peaceful evening it was, shepherd's delight and all that. But to judge from the looks of the young fellow's face when he came into the house there hadn't been much of that in the quarter of an hour they had had together.

'I said, "Sponge it down, George, sponge it down. And by good providence maybe the old gentleman won't notice anything wrong." It wasn't to reason I could let him off his duties and enter into a lot of silly peravications which in the long run might only make things worse. It's that you have to think of when you are a man in my position. But as for the Reverend's not noticing it, there, as luck would have it, I was wrong myself.

'For when the two of us were leaving the dining-room that evening after the table had been cleared and the dessert put on, he looked up from round the candles and told George to stay behind. Some quarter of an hour

after that George came along to me snuffling as if he'd been crying. But I asked no questions, not me; and, as I say, he was always pretty slow with his tongue. All that I could get out of him was that he had decocted some cock-and-bull story to account for his looks the like of which nobody in his senses could credit, let alone such a power of questioning as the old gentleman could bring to bear when roused, and apart from what comes, I suppose, from reading so many books. So the fat *was* in the fire and no mistake. And the next thing I heard, after coming back late the following evening, was that our Mr. Menzies had been called into the house and given the sack there and then, with a quarter's wages in lieu of notice. Which, after all, mind you, was as good as three-quarters a gift. What I'm saying is that handsome is as handsome does, and that was the Reverend all over; though I agree, mind you, even money isn't necessarily everything when there's what they call character to be taken into account. But if ever there was one of the quality fair and upright in all his dealings, as the saying goes, then that was the Reverend Somers. And I abide by that. He wouldn't have any truck with drink topped with insolence. That's all.

'Well, our friend came rapping at the back door that evening, shaken to the marrow if ever man was, and just livid. I told him, and I meant it too, that I was sorry for what had occurred: "It's a bad ending", I said, "to a tale that ought never to have been told." I told him too, speaking as quiet and pleasant as I am to you now, that the only hope left was to let bygones be bygones; that he had already had his fingers on George, and better go no further. Not he. He said, and he was sober enough then in all conscience, that, come what come may, here or hereafter, he'd be even with him. Ay, and he made

mention of me also, but not so rabid. A respectable man, too; never a word against him till then; and not far short of sixty. And by rabid I don't mean violent. He spoke as low and quiet as if there was a judge on the bench there to hear him, sentence said and everything over. And then . . .'

The old creature paused until yet another main-line train had gone roaring on its way. 'And then,' he continued, 'though he wasn't found till morning, he must have gone straight out—and good-bye said to nobody. He must, I say, have gone straight out to the old barn and hanged himself. The midmost rafter, sir, and a drop that would have sufficed for a Giant Goliath. All night. And it's my belief, good-bye or no good-bye, that it wasn't so much the *disgrace* of the affair but his daughter—Mrs. Shaw by name—and his grandson that were preying on his mind. And yet—why, he never so much as asked me to say a good word for him. Not one.

'Well, that was the end of that. So far. And it's a curious thing to me—though they say the Catholics aren't above making use of it—how, going back over the past clears everything up like; at least for the time being. But it's what you were saying just now about what's *solid* that sets me thinking and keeps repeating itself in my mind. Solid was the word you used. And they look it, I agree.' He deliberately twisted his head and fastened a prolonged stare on the bench on which he had been seated. 'But it doesn't follow there's much comfort in them even if they are. Solid or not, they go at last when all's said to what's little else but gas and ashes once they're fallen to pieces and been put on the fire. Which holds good, and even more so, for them that sit on them. Peculiar habit that, too—sitting! Yes, I've been told,

sir, that after what they call this cremation, and all the moisture in us gone up in steam, what's left would scarcely turn the scales by a single *hounce*!'

If sitting *is* a peculiar habit, it was even more peculiar how etherealizing the effect of my new acquaintance's misplaced aspirate had been—his one and only lapse in this respect throughout his interminable monologue.

'Yes, they say that so far as this *solid* goes, we amount to no more than what you could put into a walnut. And my point, sir,' he was emphasizing with a forefinger that only just showed itself beyond the long sleeve of his greatcoat, 'my point is *this*—that if *that's* all there is to you and me, we shouldn't need much of the substantial for what you might call the mere sole look of things, if you follow me, if *we* chose or chanced, to come back. When gone, I mean. Just enough, I suppose, to be obnoxious, as the Reverend used to say, to the naked eye.

'But all that being as it may be, the whole thing had tided over, and George was pretty nearly himself again, and another gardener advertised for—and I must say the Reverend, though after this horrible affair he was never the same man again, treated the young woman I mentioned as if he himself had been a father—I say, the whole thing had tided over, and the house was as silent as a tomb again, ay, as the sepulchre itself, when I began to notice something peculiar.

'At first maybe, little more *than* mere silence. What, in the contrast, as a matter of fact, I took for *peace*. But afterwards not so. There was a strain, so to speak, as you went about your daily doings. A strain. And especially after dark. It may have been only in one's head. I can't say. But it was there: and I could see without watching that even George had noticed it, and *he'd* hardly notice a black-beetle on a pancake.

'And at last there came something you could put word to, catch in the act, so to speak. I had gone out towards the cool of the evening after a broiling hot day, to get a little air. There was a copse of beeches, which as perhaps you may know, is a very pleasant tree for shade, sir, at a spot a bit under the mile from the back of the Vicarage. And I sat there quiet for a minute or two, with the birds and all—they were beginning to sing again, I remember—and—you know how memory strays back, though sometimes it's more like a goat tethered to a peg on a common—I was thinking over what a curious thing it is how one man's poison is another man's meat. For the funeral over, and all that, the old gentleman had thanked me for all I had done. You see what had gone before had been a hard break in his trust of a man, and he looked up from his bed at me almost with tears in his eyes. He said he wouldn't forget it. He used the word substantial, sir; and I ought by rights to have mentioned that he was taken ill the night of the inquest; a sort of stroke, the Doctor called it, though he came round, I must say, remarkably well considering his age.

'Well, I had been thinking over all this on the fringe of the woods there, and was on my way back again to the house by the field-path, when I looked up as if at call and saw what I take my oath I never remembered to have seen there before—a scarecrow. A scarecrow—and that right in the middle of the cornfield that lay beyond the stream with the bulrushes at the back of the house. Nothing funny in that, you may say. Quite so. But mark me, this was early September, and the stubble all bleaching in the sun, and it didn't look an *old* scarecrow, either. It stood up with its arms out and an old hat down over its eyes, bang in the middle of the field, its back to me, and its front to the house. I knew that field as well as I

know my own face in the looking-glass. Then how could I have missed it? What wonder then I stood stock still and had a good long stare at it, first because, as I say, I had never seen it before, and next because—but I'll be coming to that later.

'That done, and *not* to my satisfaction, I turned back a little and came along on the other side of the hedge, and so, presently at last, indoors. Then I stepped up to the upper storey to have a look at it from the windows. For you never know with these country people what they are up to, though they may seem stupid enough. Looked at from there, it wasn't so much in the middle of the field as I had fancied, seeing it from the other side. But how, thought I to myself, could you have escaped me, my friend, if you had been there all through the summer? I don't see how it could; that's flat. But if not, then it must have been put up more recently.

'I had all but forgotten about it next morning, but as afternoon came on I went upstairs and had another look. There was less heat-haze or something, and I could see it clearer and nearer, so to speak, but not quite clear enough. So I whipped along to the Reverend's study, him being still, poor gentleman, confined to his bed, in fact he never got up from it; I whipped along, I say, to the study to fetch his glasses, his boniculars, and I fastened them on that scarecrow like a microscope on a fly. You will hardly credit me, sir, when I say that what seemed to me then most different about it—different from what you might expect—was that it didn't look in any ordinary manner of speaking, quite *real*.

'I could watch it with the glasses as plain as if it had been in touch of my hand, even to the buttons and the hat-band. It wasn't the first time I had set eyes on the *clothes*, either, though I couldn't have laid name to them.

And there was something in the appearance of the thing, something in the way it bore itself up, so to speak, with its arms thrown up at the sky and its empty face, which wasn't what you'd expect of mere sticks and rags. Not, I mean, if they were nothing but just real—real like that there chair, I mean, you are sitting on now.

'I called George. I said, "George, lay your eye to these glasses"—and his face was still a bit discoloured, though his little affair in the stableyard was now a good three weeks old. "Take a squint through these, George," I said, "and tell me what you make of *that* thing over there."

'George was a slow dawdling mug if ever there was one—clumsy-fingered. But he fixed the glasses at last, and he took a good long look. Then he gave them back into my hand.

' "Well?" I said, watching his face.

' "Why, Mr. Blake," he said, meaning me, "it's a scarecrow."

' "How would you like it a bit nearer?" I said. Just off-hand, like that.

'He looked at me. "It's near enough in *them*," he said.

' "Does the air round it strike you as funny at all?" I asked him. "Out-of-the-way funny—*quivering*, in a manner of speaking?"

' "That's the heat," he said, but his lip trembled.

' "Well, George," I said, "heat or no heat, you or me must go and have a look at that thing closer some time. But not this afternoon. It's too late."

'But we didn't, sir, neither me *nor* him, though I fancy he went on thinking about it on his own account in between. And lo and behold, when I got up next morning and had slid out of my bedroom early and just as I was into the corridor to have another glance at it—and, be-

lieve me, as you looked out of that window into the morning the country was as still as a map—it wasn't there. The scarecrow, sir. It wasn't there. It was vanished. Nor could I get a glimpse of it from downstairs through the bushes *this* side of the stream. And all so still and early that even there from the back door you could hear the water moving. Now who, thinks I to myself, is answerable for *this* jiggery-pokery?

'But it's no good in this world, sir, putting reasons more far-fetched to a thing than are necessary to account for it. That you *will* agree. Some farmer's lout, I thought to myself, must have come and moved the old mommet over night. But, that being so, what was it ever put up for? Harvest done, mind you, and the crows, one would think, as welcome to what they could pick up in the stubble—if they hadn't picked it all up already—as robins to house crumbs. Besides, what about the peculiar looks of it?

'I didn't go out next day, not at all; and there being only George and me in the Vicarage, and the Reverend shut off in his room, I never remember such a holy quiet. The heavens like a vault. Eighty-four in the shade by the thingamy in the verandah, and this the fourth of September. All day long, and I'll vouch for it, the whole twenty acres of that field, but for the peewits and the rooks running over it, lay empty. And when, the sun going down, the harvest moon came up that evening—and that summer she showed up punctual as a clock the whole month round—you could see right across the flat country to the hills. And the night-jars croaking too. You could have cut the heat with a knife.

'What time the old gentleman's gruel was gone up and George out of the way, I took yet another squint through the glasses from the upper windows. And I am ready to

own that something inside of me gave a sort of a *hump*, sir, when, large as life, I saw that the scarecrow was come back again, though this is where you'll have, if you please, to go careful with me. What I saw the instant before I began to look, and to that I'd lay my affidavit, was something moving, and pretty rapid, too; and it was only at the very moment I clapped the glasses on to it that it suddenly fixed itself into what I already *supposed* I should find it to be. I've noticed that—though in little things not mattering much—before. It's your own mind that learns you before what you look at turns out to be what you expect. Else why should we be alarmed by this here *solid* sometimes? It *looks* all so: but *is* it?

'You might be suggesting that both shape and scarecrow too were all my eye and Betty Martin. But we'll see later on about that. And what about George? You don't mean to infer that he could borrow to order a mere fancy clean out of *my* head and turn it into a scarecrow in the middle of a field and in broad daylight too? That would be the long bow, and no mistake. Ay, and take it in some shape for what we *did*! No. Yet, as I say, even when I first cast eyes on it, it looked too real to be real. So there's the two on the one side, and the two on the other, and they don't make four.

'Well, sir, I must say that from that moment on I didn't like the look of things, and never have I shared a meal so mum as when George and me sat to supper that evening. From being a hearty eater his appetite was fallen almost to a cipher. He munched and couldn't swallow. I doubt if his vittles had a taste of them left. And we both of us knew as though it had been printed on the table-cloth what the other was thinking about.

'It was while we sat there, George and me alone, him on the right and the window opposite, and me on the

cupboard side in what was called the servants' hall, that we heard some words said. Not what you could understand, but still, words. I couldn't tell from where, except that it wasn't from the Reverend, and I couldn't tell what. But they dropped upon us and between us as if there was a parrot in the room, clapping its horny bill, so to say, motionless in the air. At this George stopped munching for good, his face little short of green. But except for a cockling up inside of me, I didn't make any sign I'd heard. After all, it was nothing that made any difference to *me*, though what was going on was, to say the least of it, not all as it should be. And if you knew the old Vicarage you'd agree.

'Lock-up time came at last. And George took his candle and went up to bed. Not quite as willing as usual, I fancied; though he had always been a glutton for his full meed of sleep. You could notice by the sound of his feet on the stairs that he was as you might say pushing of himself on. As for me, it had always been my way to sit up after him reading a bit with the Reverend's *Times*. But that night, I went off early. I gave a last look in on the old gentleman, and I might as well mention—though dilatory isn't the word for these doctors, even when they *are* called in in reasonable time—I say a nurse had been sent for, and his sister was now expected any day from Scotland. All well there, and him lying as peaceful on his bed as if the end had come already. Well, sir, that done, coming back along the corridor I blew out my candle and stood waiting. The candle out, the moon came streaming in, and the outside from the window lay spread out beneath me almost bright as day. I looked this ways and I looked that ways, back and front; but nothing to be seen, nor heard neither. Yet it seemed not more than one deep breath after I had closed my eyes in sleep that

night that I was stark wideawake again, trying to make sense of some sound I'd heard.

'Old houses—I'm used to them; the timbers crinkle like a bee-hive. But this wasn't timbers, oh no! It might maybe have been wind, you'll say. But what chance of wind with not a hand's breadth of cloud moving in the sky, and such a blare of moonlight as would keep even a field mouse from peeping out of its hole? What's more, not to know whether what you are listening to is in or outside of your head isn't much help to a good night's rest. Still I fell off at last, unnoticing.

'Next morning, as George came back from taking up the breakfast tray, I had a good look at him in the sunlight, but you couldn't tell whether the marks round his eyes were natural—from what had gone before with the other, I mean—or from *insommia*. Best not to meddle, I thought; just wait. So I gave him good morning and poured out the coffee and we sat to it as usual, the wasps coming in over the marmalade as if nothing had happened.

'All quiet that day, only rather more so, as it always is in a sick-room house. Doctor come and gone, but no nurse yet; and the old gentleman I thought looking very ailing. But he spoke to me quite cheerful. Just like his old self, too, to be sympathizing with me for the double-duty I'd been doing in the house. He asked after the garden, too, though there was as fine a bunch of black grapes on his green plate as any out of Canaan. It was the drought was in his mind. And just as I was leaving the room, my hand on the door, he mentioned one or two compliments about my having stayed on with him so long. "You can't pay for that out of any Bank," he said to me, smiling at me almost merry-like, his beard over the sheet.

'"I hope and trust, sir," I said, "while I am with you, there will be no further fuss." But I had a surety even as I said the words that he hadn't far to go, so that fusses if come they did, didn't really much matter to him. I don't see how you would be likely to notice them when things are drawing to a last conclusion; though I am thankful to say that what did occur was kept from him to the end.

'That night there came something sounding about the house that wasn't natural and no mistake. I had scarcely slept a wink, and as soon as I heard it, I was on with my tail-coat over my night-shirt in a jiffy, though there was no need for light. I had fetched along my winter overcoat, too, one the Reverend himself had passed on to me—this very coat on my back now—and with that over my arm, I pushed open the door and looked in on George. Maybe he had heard my coming, maybe he had heard the other, I couldn't tell which, but there he was, sitting up in bed—the moonlight flooding in on his long white face and tousled hair—and his trousers and braces thrown down anyhow on the chair beside it.

'I said to him, "What's wrong, George? Did you hear anything? A voice or anything?"

'He sat looking at me with his mouth open as if he couldn't shut it, and I could see he was shaken to the very roots. Now mind you, here I was in the same quandary, as they call it, as before. What I'd heard might be real, some animal, fox, badger, or the like, prowling round outside, or it might not. If not, and the house being exercised, as I said, though a long way back, and the Reverend gentleman still in this world himself, I had a kind of trust that what was there, if it *was* anything, couldn't get in. But naturally I was in something of a fever to make sure.

' "George," I said, "you mustn't risk a chill or anything of that sort"—and it had grown a bit cold in the small hours—"but it's up to us—our duty, George—with the Reverend at death's door and all, to know what's what. So if you'll take a look round on the outside I'll have a search through on the in. What we must be cautious about is that the old gentleman isn't disturbed."

'George went on looking at me, though he had by this time shuffled out of bed and into the overcoat I had handed him. He stood there, with his boots in his hand, shivering, but more maybe because he felt cold after the warmth of his sheets than because he had quite taken in what I had said.

' "Do you think, Mr. Blake", he asked me, sitting down again on his bed, "—you don't think he is come back again?"

'*Come back*, he said, just like that. And you'd have supposed from the quivering of his mouth I might have stopped it!

' "Who's, George, come back?" I asked him.

' "Why, what we looked through the glasses at in the field," he said. "It had his look."

' "Well, George," I said, speaking as moderate and gentle as you might to a child, "we know as how dead men tell no tales. Let alone scarecrows, then. All we've got to do is just to make sure. You do as you're bid, then, my lad. You go your ways, and I'll go mine. There's never any harm can befall a man if his conscience is easy."

'But that didn't seem to satisfy him. He gave a gulp and stood up again, still looking at me. Stupid or not, he was always one for doing his duty, was George. And I must say that what I call courage is facing what you're

afraid of in your very innards, and not mere crashing into danger, eyes shut.

'"I'd lief as not go down, Mr. Blake," he said. "Leastways, not alone. He never took much of a liking to me. He said he'd be evens. Not alone, Mr. Blake."

' "What have you to fear, George, my lad?" I said. "Man or spectre, the fault was none of yours."

'He buttoned the coat up, same as I am wearing it now, and he gave me just one look more. It's hard to say all that's in a fellow-creature's eyes, sir, when they are full of what no tongue in him could tell. But George had shut his mouth at last, and the moon on his face gave him a queer look, far-away-like, as if all that there was of him, this world or the next, had come to keep him company.

'And when the hush that had come down on the house was broken again, and this time it *was* the wind, though away high up over the roof, he didn't look at me any more. It was the last between us. He turned his back on me and went off out into the passage and down the stairs, and I listened until I could hear him in the distance scrabbling with the bar at the back. It was one of those old-fashioned doors, sir, you must understand, just loaded with locks and bolts, like in all old places.

'As for myself, I didn't move for a bit. There wasn't any hurry that I could see. Oh, no. I just sat down on the bed on the place where George had sat, and waited. And you may depend upon it, I stayed pretty quiet there —with all that responsibility, and not knowing what might happen next. And then presently what I heard was as though a voice had said something—very sharp and bitter; then said no more. There came a sort of moan, and then no more again. But by that time I was on my way on my rounds inside the house as I'd promised;

and so, out of hearing: and when I got back to my bedroom again everything was still and quiet. And I took it of course that George had got back safe to his. . . .'

Since the fire had faded and the light of day was gone, the fish-like phosphorescence of the gas-mantles had grown brighter, and this elderly man, whose name was Blake, I understood, was looking at me out of his white, almost leper-like face in this faint gloom as steadily almost as George must have been looking at him a few minutes before he had descended the back stairs of the Vicarage, never, I gathered, to set foot on them again.

'Did you manage to get any more sleep that night?' I said.

Mr. Blake seemed to be pleasingly surprised at so easy a question.

'That was the mistake of it,' he said. 'He wasn't found till morning. Cold for hours, and precious little to show why.'

'So you did manage to get a little sleep?'

But this time he made no answer.

'Your share, I suppose, was quite a substantial one?'

'Share?' he said.

'In the will. . .?'

'Now, didn't I tell you myself', he protested with some warmth, 'that that, as it turned out, wasn't so; though why, it would take half a dozen or more of these lawyers to explain. And even at that, I don't know as what I did get has brought me anything much to boast about. I'm a free man, that's true. But for how long? Nobody can stay in this world here for ever, can he?'

With a peculiar rocking movement of his small head he peered round and out of the door. 'And though in this world', he went on, 'you may have not one *iota* of

harm to blame yourself for *to* yourself, there may still be misunderstandings, and them that have been deceived by them may be waiting for you in the next. So when it comes to what that captain of the *Hesper*——'

But at this moment our prolonged *tête-à-tête* was interrupted by a thickset vigorous young porter carrying a bucket of coals in one hand and a stumpy torch of smouldering brown paper in the other. He mounted one of our chairs and with a tug of finger and thumb instantly flooded our dingy quarters with an almost intolerable gassy glare. That done, he raked out the ash-grey fire with a lump of iron that may once have been a poker, and flung all but the complete contents of his bucket of coal on to it. Then he looked round and saw who was sitting there. Me he passed over. I was merely a bird of passage. But he greeted my fellow derelict as if he were an old acquaintance.

'Good evening, sir,' he said, and in that slightly indulgent and bantering voice which suggests past favours rather easily earned. 'Let in a little light on the scene. I didn't notice you when I came in and was beginning to wonder where you had got to.'

His patron smirked back at him as if any such trifling human attention was a peculiar solace. This time the porter deliberately caught my eye. And his own was full of meaning. It was as if there were some little privy and ironical understanding between us in which this third party was unlikely to share. I ignored it, rose to my feet and clutched my bag. A passenger train had come hooting into the station, its gliding lighted windows patterning the platform planks. Alas, yet again it wasn't mine. Still—such is humanity, I preferred my own company, just then.

When I reached the door, and a cold and dingy prospect showed beyond it, I glanced back at Mr. Blake, sitting there in his greatcoat beside the apparently extinguished fire. With a singularly mournful look, as of a lost dog, on his features, he was gazing after me. He seemed to be deploring the withdrawal even of my tepid companionship. But in that dreadful gaseous luminosity there was nothing, so far as I could see, that any mortal man could by any possibility be afraid of, alive or dead. So I left him to the porter. And—as yet—we have not met again.

AT FIRST SIGHT

At first sight any passer-by chancing to notice the grey-flannelled figure of the young man who was now making his way round the eastern horn of Galloway Crescent, would have assumed that he was blind. But this was not so. It is true the slender cane he carried in his hand was poised exploringly in front of him as he stepped quietly on, but then he never tapped with it; and though his eyes were hidden from view beneath a green silk shade attached to his head under his hat, an occasional slight sidelong movement of that head suggested that he was making at least *some* rudimentary use of them.

There was a peculiar grace in his movements, too, such as any wild but timid creature shows even when kept in a cage, and an almost absurd fastidiousness was manifest in his clothes. And though—in part, possibly, because this hideous green shade of his had always shielded his

face from the furies of a London sun—his features were unusually pale, there was nothing positively effeminate in his looks. Wild things, after all, however timid, are not necessarily of the weaker sex.

Residents in Galloway Crescent were seldom visible at their windows. To many of them, none the less, Cecil must long since have become a familiar figure since the pavement between their iron balconies and their basements was part of his daily constitutional. Where old Professor Smith lived indeed, at No. 24—an old gentleman so profoundly interested in Persian literature that he had no need of 'the time'—the neat parlour-maid sometimes actually set her pantry clock by this young man. Busy at her dusting, her dark eye would glance down from the Professor's first-floor drawing-room—to which she was all but the sole visitor—and would descry Cecil gently forging his way along with a motion like that of a yacht on a halcyon sea.

'Why, there's that young Mr. Jennings!' she would exclaim to herself, with a thrill in her mind, and would at once run off downstairs to look at the clock to see if its hands—as they usually did—actually pointed to ten minutes past eleven.

On this particular morning, however, Cecil was at least a quarter of an hour before his time; and to judge from his progress, a stiffer breeze than usual was cat's-pawing his sea. On approaching the Crescent's westerly horn, however, his footsteps began to lag. And now he seemed to be taking the liveliest possible interest in the outskirts of the scene which his shade and his affliction enabled him to command.

His slightly protruding dark-blue eyes were fixed on the pavement as if in eager search of something. They were. What indeed for days past his mind had been posi-

tively bent on was the hope of discovering—not its fellow—but the *owner* of the grey suède glove that now lay safely tucked away in the side pocket of his jacket. That hope was rapidly waning—to leave him not only restless but forlorn. This morning he was little more than pursuing its shadow, as one may pursue the vanishing memories of a happy dream.

In a monotonous life even the smallest excitement seems to have dropped clean out of the blue. And since Cecil's day-by-day had for years been as regular and punctual as Professor Smith's parlour-maid's pantry clock, to want anything badly was a novel and exciting experience. He was still in his early twenties, and in part because of his affliction, in part because of a natural shyness, he was still under the unrelaxing care of a kind of step-grandmother, Mrs. le Mercier—a lady of ample means if not always of entirely transparent ends.

Cecil also had money of his own. Comfort lapped him in; every wish—within reason—could be gratified. There was only this one comparatively slight ocular disability. He might have been a cripple, or an imbecile, or a man of genius, or gravel-blind; and even then not always unhappy. But nothing so tragic as that. He was merely incapable of looking *up*. From his earliest infancy this curious and baffling derangement of his eyes had kept whatever attention he had to give fixed almost exclusively on the ground. By thrusting back his head a little he could, it is true, increase his optical range. But any effort of this kind was severe, and was apt to cause him excruciating pain. And Mrs. le Mercier—'Grummumma', as he called her—steadily set her face against these experiments. She counselled patience and moderation—to any extreme.

'I cannot bear the distress of it,' she would cry, when

Cecil falteringly groped upwards with his head. And though, naturally, she had spent a good deal of money to get expert advice, she had never given up hope that time which heals all things might alleviate this, and had never been in favour of drastic measures. She hated the notion of plaguing the poor dear boy, and even of reminding him more often than was necessary to his well-being that he was different from other young men.

'After all,' she would sometimes confide in her friends, 'so long as dear Cecil is all right in *himself*, that is all that really matters. There is nothing, thank God, *abnormal* in any way, and fine frenzies, I am thankful to say, are not Cecil's forte. That is my conviction. So long as he is all right in *himself*, we must just make the best we can of his little handicap.' Still, even Grummumma occasionally had her doubts; and could be peevish when incommoded.

Standing in his shade in the middle of the luxurious, almost lush, French carpet laid all over Mrs. le Mercier's drawing-room, and soundlessly rotating on his heels, Cecil could see nothing beyond a circle of a circumference of about nine or ten feet. By mounting up on to a chair he could of course extend his survey. Still, all human venture is only *human* venture. And at no time in his life had Cecil ever been tempted to become an explorer or a pioneer. He was as normal in that respect as most people. And his grandmother, in the kindness of the heart that lay somewhere within her ample bosom, had, if anything, tended to restrict his range. Whims of a contrary kind she would greet with indulgent, if not copious, amusement. And as time went on—though it seemed powerless to add anything more suggestive of age than 'presence' to her general effect—that amusement grew ever more pronounced.

Inspired one April morning in his seventeenth year by a bright idea, Cecil had been discovered kneeling, hair-brush in hand, busily knocking into his bedroom wall—a foot or so above the wainscot—a tintack or two. Unframed photographs of the 'old masters' lay scattered on the floor around him.

'You know how I enjoy looking at them, as much as I *can* look at them,' he had explained to Grummumma, archly surveying him from the doorway. 'I wanted just to see if—well, you see, at *this* height. . . .'

'And Grummumma doesn't blame her dear boy,' she had replied in that deep rich voice of hers. 'It's the happiest of thoughts! None the less, I am perfectly certain, Cecil, you didn't want any one—one of the maids, say—who happened to be passing your door to die of laughing. You can't imagine how absurd the effect is—even to *me*. No, Cecil, we don't want that.' And Cecil had at once concurred.

It may or may not be true that *children* in general enjoy a far more comprehensive view of life than their elders are apt to surmise. It was true anyhow of Cecil: and this in spite of his poor eyes. His mother, indeed, in his quite early days, had realized this, and had always made a point of engaging tall, strapping nurse-maids, to the end that the little man, while at least *she* had any say in the matter, should see as much of the world as possible.

Fortunately, too, in this respect she had not died until fully six months after he had been breeched, when to be carried about at all, even by the Queen of Brobdingnag herself, would have been a little humiliating. He had *once* enjoyed 'the larger view'; that was the point.

On the other hand, all children, however freely they may twist their big heads on their small bodies, are accustomed to being close to the ground, which may in

part account for the fact that as they grow older they are apt to have a rather narrow outlook. Cecil, having as an infant spent most of his waking hours in high chairs and in the arms of these nursery grenadiers, became suddenly *shorter*, so to speak, as soon as his mother died; and Grummumma was not one to gainsay the obvious.

But then again, mere custom, while it may blunt and dull the mind, can also bless it with almost incredible funds of patience and endurance. And of an uncomplaining household—consisting of himself, Mrs. le Mercier, an occasional grand-niece, three servants, a gardener, his boy, and a kind of crippled old pensioner who did the boots and other odd and dirty jobs—Cecil was the most uncomplaining member. It was to outward appearance a singularly placid household. The servants kept their audibility to their own quarters; Eirene, Grummumma's grand-niece, was unusually discreet for a young woman of her age; Cecil was no conversationalist; and Mrs. le Mercier, though she had a temper, very rarely showed or lost it. Concealed and kept, it was, if anything, more intimidating. Even at its extreme, it dressed itself up in the mantle of a mute, peculiar, ferocious scorn.

Any kind of incompetence in any home cannot but be a burden, however philosophically that burden may be borne. The moment it threatened to become unbearable in hers, Grummumma became a dowager Mrs. Christian, while remaining Mrs. Worldly-Wisewoman in her methods of correcting it. She could be liberal, even magnanimous to any one really dependent on her, and she never humiliated the humble. Her husband, after a long tedious illness, had, as it were, suddenly dropped out of her life. This was years ago. She thought of him none the less kindly and even sentimentally, whenever she did think of him, because it had been a release to them both.

She had never had any children, and every scrap of maternal instinct she possessed was squandered on Cecil. He was hers 'for keeps'. 'He is "my young man",' she had more than once fondly sighed of him over her tea-table. 'If anything happened to him . . .' a momentary frumpishness of utter dejection would settle over her copious figure; one plump ringed hand resting on the Indian tea-tray beside her while she followed up the sentence in the silence of her mind.

All this was none the less a little curious, for Mrs. le Mercier couldn't endure in any human being the slightest deviation from the normal. At sight of a humpback her eyes rolled in her head. She could be charitable—but only from a distance. As a girl she had been made to read the life of St. Francis. It had disgusted her. This experience—and similar compulsions—had tainted for her the very sight of a serious book. Even the marks in a strange face of poverty or sickness filled her with dismay—'froze her up'.

'I know it, my dear,' she had once confided in a friend, 'I am at the mercy of horrors.' And there came with the words such a look of helplessness into her bold and formidable face that even cruelty itself would have hesitated to set to work on such a victim.

It may have been in order to spare her own feelings, then, that though she had never desisted in her efforts to better poor Cecil's eyes, she had steadily opposed anything in the nature of an operation. Physicians and specialists from every country in Europe had been consulted, turn and turn about, and had expressed their views at large when out of hearing of their subject. For Cecil, this ordeal had almost become a habit. He knew how to avoid being hurt, became an expert in specialists' little ways, and usually feigned to be much more of a

muff even than he looked. And when the specialist was gone, he would settle his silk shade over his eyes and just simply become himself again, whatever that might mean.

'We cannot be downcast,' Grummumma would sometimes declare in astonishing contradiction of her habits, 'we *cannot* be downcast, my dear boy, provided we know the worst. Face that, and all is well. Not of course that all these *clever* men intend to be optimistic. It's just false hopes that are the bane of most people. The poor hope to be rich, the afflicted hope to be whole, little realizing how much happier they would be if they remained contented with things as they are, and expected them so to stay. After all, Cecil, the ways of Providence are inscrutable.'

So Cecil had continued not to look up. On the other hand, there is a metaphorical use of the phrase, and Cecil had been reminded of it at rather frequent intervals. Here Grummumma and he indeed completely parted company. Particularly when Canon Bagshot came not merely to lunch but to 'help'. When Cecil was a little boy, the Canon used to take him—used indeed to wedge him—between his angular knees and talk to him. Being spare, dark, and tall, Canon Bagshot looked a more ascetic man even than he actually was. He had done excellent, if rather active, work in the parish and was one of the few human beings whose company Mrs. le Mercier could enjoy without any symptom on his part of a polite subservience; and no local scheme of betterment was complete without him. Among these schemes, Canon Bagshot had somehow got imbedded in his mind the notion that Cecil might be cured of his physical difficulty if in *spirit*, so to speak, he could be persuaded or induced or compelled to 'look up'.

One particular catechism of this kind remained vividly

in Cecil's memory, and Grummumma had been present at it, sitting with her back to the window, and drinking it all in. There was a particular large rose of many graduated reds in the beautiful carpet upon which he remembered he had then been standing. Two large bony hands had been holding his elbows, but only the extreme edges of the Canon's dark wide dinted chin were visible as it gently wagged up and down.

'You know well, my dear boy,' the voice had assured him, 'how much we all have your happiness at heart. And if we urge you to things even a little painful in themselves, it is only for your good. And now I am told you refuse to speak sometimes when you are spoken to. Why is that?'

At the moment Cecil had no wish to refuse to speak, but his mouth was dry, he felt extremely uncomfortable, and what he most wanted to do *was* to look up into Canon Bagshot's face—though only to see if it resembled what was suggested by the tones of his voice. He meant to explain too that it was useless to ask him the same question again and again when he had already answered it. Instead of this, he at last managed to mutter, 'I don't want to.'

'But then, you see, my dear boy,' Canon Bagshot had replied firmly, 'it is just those *don't wants* that harass and impede us in life's pilgrimage. It is not what we want or don't want to do, but what we ought to do that matters. Your dear grandmamma wishes only for your *good*. "Ah," you may say, "I can't be like other boys." And that, of course, in its degree is perfectly true. God's will be done. But it doesn't mean that in many other things you cannot be *better* than other boys, setting them an example which should shame them, knowing what advantages they have, while at the same time you yourself

should realize the many, many advantages denied to them which have *not* been denied to you. Do you follow me?'

The Canon's voice, its mere accents, somehow reminded Cecil of an illustration in one of his story books—the picture of an Alpine guide, brass horn to lip, just vanishing round an incredibly precipitous bluff of snow and rock. It invited one on.

Cecil indeed had in actual fact been a long way in front throughout this speech. He now had to hasten back in order to nod and shake his head. This contradictory gesture was a little instinctive device of his own. If he *had* been able to raise his eyes, he might, with the same end in view, have opened them wider, then shut them.

'Precisely,' cried the Canon. 'And examples are better than precepts. Are they not? You would hardly believe it, perhaps, but there is a poor old woman living in Fish Street, not a mile from here, who is compelled to lie on her back day in, day out, in one dingy little room into which I should hesitate to take a dog. She knows absolutely nothing of the gentle circumstances that surround *you*. Only one dingy old blanket to cover her; only one window, cracked and grimed, to look out of all day long. And I ask you, is she unhappy?'

She must be very stupid if she is not, had been Cecil's first thought. What he said was, 'I hate old women in Fish Street.'

'You will please, Cecil,' came a voice from Grummumma's bow-window, 'you will please, when you are addressing Canon Bagshot, leave off these sullen manners. Those who live with you may be accustomed to them; visitors are not. Besides it is *very* irreverent.'

'Well, my dear boy,' continued the Canon magnanimously, 'whatever you may think, you are mistaken.

That poor miserable old woman is as happy as the days are long.' The last part of the remark on this bleared winter afternoon was perhaps less appropriate than it seemed on the surface. But Cecil made no comment.

'Now to have to use physical persuasion in your case', the Canon continued, 'is the last thing any one could wish. All that I want you to remember is this: Humility, Trust, Gratitude. Say these words over to yourself night and morning. Say them now. No,' the Canon rapidly added, remembering similar adjurations in the past, 'say them over when you are alone. For it is not, dear boy, as if we could plead ignorance. We *know* our duty. It is in black and white. "I must order myself lowly and reverent to all my betters." What does that mean? Surely, no scowling looks, no dumb-doggedness. Friends are constantly praying for you; sympathy is being poured out for your affliction. But though it is your lot in life to be compelled to be unable to face the world boldly, as Christian faced Apollyon, in *spirit* you can, like all of us, at least learn to look up. And I, as one of the humblest of spiritual pastors and masters, if you remain recalcitrant, must find some means of insisting upon your making the attempt. No sullenness, now, no dark clouds! *What* were our Gentle Three?—Humility, Trust, Gratitude.' How odd a paradox. It was this Gentle Three that poor Cecil in later life had most to contend against; if, at least, there was to be any hope of *his* becoming the Happy Warrior.

But these were far-away days. Sunday by Sunday Cecil had continued to sit beside Mrs. le Mercier in her pew at St. Peter's and St. Paul's. But the Canon's sermons on these occasions were of a more general application. And since they differed as little in form as they

did in matter and Cecil knew their trend by heart, much of this edifying half hour was spent in day-dreaming. Here he had an advantage over his neighbours. For not only were the mean decorations of the Corinthian pillar and of the pitch-pine roof over his head, and the utterly dehumanized saints depicted in the stained glass chancel windows—mustard green, blue, and crushed strawberry—out of his range, but no one could judge from his downcast eyes on what his attention *was* fixed.

But on the whole his relations with Grummumma were friendly enough, and, when visitors were present, even cordial. Then, indeed, if only in a negative sort of way, he *might* be said to look up to her, though it was difficult to tell exactly to what extent. And partly because he could not help himself and partly because of a natural indolence, he had just gone his own way—the way within, that is—without saying very much about it and without deliberately setting his will against hers.

Cecil, however, could hardly be said to be thinking of this *auld lang syne* as he gently pushed on round the Crescent this particular sunny morning, one hand clasping the derelict glove in his jacket pocket. Only the faintest nebulous incubus of it hung in his mind. Meanwhile his eyes wandered restlessly and heedlessly over the ground at his feet. He had long been an expert in his own orbit. Quite apart from such manageable refuse as cigar and cigarette ends, dead matches, hairpins, footprints, pavement weeds, moss, the laying of asphalt, puddles, mud, dogs, cats, pebbles, straw and so on, not to mention the lovely way of the wind in withered leaves or drifting snow—concerning which he was probably the only expert for miles around, he was also a connoisseur of horses' hoofs, boots and shoes, socks and laces, of the nether portion of trouser-legs, and of feminine skirts,

shoes, and ankles. He was an expert, that is, without in the least being aware of it.

He had long enjoyed the habit, too, of steadily scrutinizing what happened to interest him indoors as well as out. Reading desperately tired his eyes, and so, even apart from the books his Grummumma kept out of his way, his literary range was decidedly narrow. But while he looked and read, he usually thought. He was indeed a master of his own exceedingly small fraction of the complete human range of consciousness—a range fairly considerable in itself and one which of course, if only in the world of matter, is being steadily amplified.

But this fine morning he was anxious, uneasy, and sick at heart. His eyes wandered vacantly, his attention was elsewhere: simply because his one and only desire was to return the rather dingy glove in his pocket to its owner. He just wanted to say, 'You will forgive me for intruding, but I picked this up, you see. And you may have missed it perhaps.'

It was never very easy to raise his hat when his Grummumma whispered, 'Ssh, Cecil, there's Mrs. Shrub, or Lady Linsey, or Miss Bolsover,' mainly because he got so nervous and usually hit with his knuckles the shade over his eyes before his fingers reached the brim above.

But this time he was going to do it very carefully, and then take his leave. It seemed to him a small glove compared with Eirene's, with Mrs. le Mercier's, or even with that of their parlour-maid, Janet, which he had seen by accident hanging beside her skirt (its hand within it), at the area gate but a few weeks ago, after one of her 'afternoons out'.

This glove was scented, too, though not quite so delicately as would seem to make it impossible for Grummumma to detect it even though it lay in his pocket.

Grummumma's gloves were also scented, but rather with herself than with anything. He had deduced, too, that this specimen of a glove cannot have been an expensive one. Yet the fact that it had a tiny hole in its first finger only made him the more anxious to return it to its owner. But—his heart had come into his mouth once more—how on earth was he to recognize her unless she happened to be wearing the same blue serge skirt, and the same stockings and shoes as when she had come his way and had gone?

Never had there been such a fool as he was—he knew that well enough. But to be a fool in public is one thing, to be a fool in one's own private soul is another. And that was what he was being now. He was being timid and ashamed simply because there was the faintest possibility that Grummumma might herself be abroad that morning in her soft glacé kid shoes, or that Canon Bagshot might come treading along in his stout parochials, or spry, odious, mincing Miss Bolsover, with her ringing voice and old-fashioned springsiders. All three of them would realize at once that he was not merely enjoying his morning walk, but hanging about, loafing. They would watch him; their gaze would bore into his back; and by that time it might be—well, too late. That the sun was scorchingly hot and the pavement a continuous glare, with its sharp-cut shadows here and there and its steady, pungent, broiling odour, was, however, a joy rather than a martyrdom.

Cecil had by this time not only turned the corner of the Crescent but was approaching the first of a row of shops. Their window-blinds hung dazzling in the sunshine, casting delightful shadows. A medley of noises zigzagged across the air. The whole vista of High Street, he knew, was steadily effervescing with traffic of matu-

tinal gaiety and business. It was odd how one's mind roved to and fro from point to point in memory without once realizing its direction, or what had intervened. He had suddenly become a little boy again, his right hand tenaciously clutching the iron handle of a perambulator, which a plump young nursemaid, named Annie, in a stiff print gown, was pushing in front of her. At the same moment a grocer's assistant had come back to mind, a young man with a voice almost as rich in flavours as the inside of the shop in which he served. On the morning in memory he had slipped out of the shop to talk to Annie. And though Cecil could not recall any of the pleasantries they had actually exchanged, he could remember how double-voiced the young man with the frayed white apron and corrugated button-boots had seemed to be—just as if what he was saying had two meanings, one for Annie and one for himself.

And Annie had giggled on, while her cotton-gloved hand stroked gently the iron handle of the perambulator above Cecil's dumpy thumb. He hadn't liked the young man, and had even attempted to lift his young eyes just to give him a stare, to show it. The pain had dreadfully frightened him. And he was glad Annie had afterwards married a strange postman who had come to help in the district during the Valentine season.

This romantic little recollection for some reason made him still more ill at ease, and once again he reassured himself by clutching at the glove in his pocket. He hated the shops in this busier time of the day. He hated all crowds, 'gatherings', congregations. He could tell by the legs and feet of the people thronging the street and its shop windows that from their upper parts they were also curiously examining this green-shaded stranger in their midst.

'What the devil!' he would now and then quietly mutter to himself. And then perhaps: 'Oh, mind your eye!' These hardly refined exclamations, picked up he knew not whence, were part of the life Grummumma knew nothing about. And still he held on, with that gentle antenna-like movement of his ivory-headed cane, and with rapid searching glances from under his shade at every human extremity that came into view.

This was his sixth similar excursion, and to-day he pushed on still further—three more shops: an ironmonger's, with lawn mowers, syringes, pruning-knives and slug traps in the low window, all well within view; a tobacconist's—but Cecil had not been taught to smoke—and a tailor's and outfitter's.

Here for a moment he came to a pause. For a moment even his mission edged a little out of his mind. He adored clothes. Apart from his little collection of unframed prints and engravings and postage stamps, and apart of course from the plate on Sundays, they were all but his only means of being extravagant. In blind furious moments he had, it is true, more than once given every penny he had in his pocket to some dog-guarded 'blind man', or paralytic, or forlorn-looking shrew selling matches in the street. This was not exactly charity, even though his heart seemed to gulp in his body at sight of them. It was a hostage to fortune, a clumsy attempt to call quits, perhaps.

For in general, like Grummumma, Cecil detested beggars, and edged away from anything that could be described as ghastly, horrible, or even unpleasant. He detested rags, dirt and neglect; even the brazen spectacle of 'potatoes' in stockings or of leaking welts failed to amuse him. His shoes, his suits, his own gloves and hats and other adornments were made to measure. He en-

joyed considering himself a fop; his little, innocent airs and graces were a sort of hobby. The 'man' would call at the house, and Mrs. le Mercier, anxious to indulge any little harmless whim, would leave them to themselves. In all that concerns clothes and kindred matters, indeed, Cecil was at least as much of an expert as was Thomas Carlyle; and this morning he edged slowly along the display in the window, digesting for future use the exclusive shapes and tints and fabrics displayed on the other side of its plate glass.

Then suddenly at whisper of a silken frou-frou behind him, a flush of shame mounted into his pale cheek, and he turned about and retraced his footsteps. And Providence was watching over him. For he had trailed on not more than a dozen paces or so when, having arrived at the two private doors separating tobacconist's from ironmonger's, his anxious glance alighted on the long expected. And every drop of blood in him stood still.

The owner of this particular pair of shoes must herself have reached the tobacconist's while he had been engaged at the outfitter's. And, though the indiscriminate noises of the street had suddenly mounted up into a prolonged roar, and then had ceased, and though every fibre of Cecil's body seemed to be at an affrighting stretch, he knew as well as if an angel had whispered it into his ear, that she—the longed-for stranger—was now actually surveying the peculiar creature he appeared to be.

In a strange, dizzy eternity, every forecast of this meeting, turned over and over in his mind night after night of late before he had fallen asleep, fled on the four shining winds of heaven. It was as if he had come to the very end of a long straight road—and then, nothing.

He had forgotten Grummumma, Canon Bagshot, Miss Bolsover, Mrs. Grundy, all the conventions and his man-

ners; he had forgotten himself, his shade, the glove, the universe. There was nothing anywhere but just this mute unknown figure, of whose slim person in its black-braided blue serge skirt less than one-third was visible to him. How odd that even in a world renowned for its oddities just a scarcely perceptible little flaw in the sewing of a toe-cap would alone have been enough to distinguish those shoes from every other 'foot-wear' in man's five continents!

Perceptible—no, that was not the real mystery. The shoes, the skirt, were all he could see; and yet it seemed the presence of this unknown girl, the very being of her, flooded his senses, his mind, and—one might almost add—his soul. There was not even the perfume of the glove to help him. Possibly that slim malacca cane of his had now become in sober truth one of a pair of human antennae. What he had meant to say, what he had heard himself saying again and again—not a single syllable of it recurred to his mind. His chin had lifted itself by a fraction of an inch. He could scarcely breathe, and his heart, as though it were a hare on a dewy hillside when distant hounds are hallooing, seemed to be sitting perfectly still in its ribbed cage.

'Forgive me,' he heard a voice utterly unfamiliar and yet his own, pleading, 'Please forgive me. I have been looking for you for days and days and days. This is your glove.' He was holding it out, as if, poor young man, it was the very secret of his life.

At this the feet beneath his gaze seemed to have planted themselves a little more firmly in their shoes. There was an enormous pause, while instinctively the young woman hesitated to thrust our her gloved right hand or her bare left, till this moment concealed in her skirt. As a matter of fact, it was the bare left hand that

came into Cecil's view. And at first glimpse of it—though Cecil was unconscious of the cause for at least half an hour afterwards—a frigid and nauseating misgiving and disappointment had swept over him.

'And here,' said the voice, 'here's the very hand it belongs to. Thank you *ever* so much.'

Perhaps because their fellow servants, his eyes, were unable to be of as much service as they might have been, Cecil's ears were acuter than most. Before that voice's sound had come to an end, he had half-consciously examined and dissected its every minutest cadence and nuance, just as a connoisseur may sit down to the critical enjoyment, say of a fugue by Bach, or a melody of Handel's. It rang within him—it very quietly rang within him—and he never doubted in the least that he could read not only much of its owner, but even of its owner's past in its inflexions. How strange; for never in the world was there such a benighted ignoramus, such a poor, abandoned creature on a remote atoll, as he.

'Yes,' said the voice, 'that's *it* right enough. I should know it, if by nothing else, by the hole in the first finger. I hate mending, and I haven't much time. But how you came to know it was mine, and why you should have taken so much trouble about it simply beats me. It simply beats me, I confess.'

Every vestige of self-confidence had by this time evaporated in Cecil's mind. Yet—and how he managed it he could not conceive—the next remark he heard himself making appalled him by its boldness: 'I want, if you don't mind,' he said, 'to keep it. Or will you please let me give it you another time?'

He could not see the longish nose and the dark eyes beneath the delicate curved dark eyebrows of the face now confronting him beneath its cheap straw hat. Its

whole attention was steadily, the least bit suspiciously, and yet with immeasurable candour, fixed on his mouth. 'It isn't of much *value*,' said the voice, but without the faintest trace of mockery in it.

'No, but you see', blurted Cecil anxiously, 'I have kept it so many days now, and should miss it. . . . I haven't very much to do, you see. And, of course, not many friends.'

This was well on the right side of exaggeration, since in sober fact and in any real meaning of the word, he hadn't any friends at all. For though his rather remote cousin Eirene seemed to be almost more often in the house than not, and was occasionally accompanied by familiars of her own of both sexes, Cecil could never be perfectly at his ease with her, let alone with them. Nor could he ever be quite sure why she was so persistently sympathetic. He hated that even more than he deplored her silly French shoes and the colours and patterns she chose for her clothes. As for her friends, they never took any notice of him, no more at least than if he were a rather unusual chair, a dumb animal, or a pet canary that spent its existence pecking at a blunt-headed yellow spray of groundsel and enjoying an unlimited supply of lump sugar.

'Well,' responded the clear crisp voice, 'even if you haven't, you don't seem to mind very much.'

'I mind *enormously*,' cried the young man, so loudly that he positively alarmed a little old gentleman with a purplish face and pale blue eyes who happened to be passing at the moment, and who whipped round on him like a startled bird.

'Then why don't you make some?' inquired the voice.

'I meant not friends—the glove,' blurted Cecil des-

perately. 'I mean, I want to *keep* it, May I give it you next time? To-morrow?'

'I am not so sure as I can get out,' replied the stranger.

'Well, if you please could and *would*,' he said, 'I shall be waiting here at this time. I shall be waiting here until—'

'Until?' echoed the other.

'Why, until', he trailed on, 'there is no hope at all of your ever coming again.'

Once more there came a pause. The eyes regarding him had fallen, and were now overwhelmed, though evidently not for the first time, by a cloud of doubt and perplexity.

'Well, I really don't know that I ought to be seeing you again, I really don't—' the stranger's voice was repeating, as if she were speaking to herself. 'We don't know one another, and it isn't as if *you*. . . . Not that I should—necessarily—mind that.'

For the breath of an instant Cecil's hand had fluttered towards his pocket as if to produce a card. It dropped again. 'My name is only Jennings,' he said. 'And I have a perfectly silly Christian name, though it exactly describes me, I suppose—what I look like, I mean. So perhaps you wouldn't mind about that. And though, if you don't mind, I won't ask you yours—not here and now, I mean; surely we do know one another now—a little? And you will *come*?'

He awaited her answer, lips ajar, shoulders stooping, as if in expectation of manna from heaven.

'And meanwhile, I suppose, I am to keep *this* hand somehow covered up!' There may have been the faintest ring of defiance in her tone, and yet, it seemed, not defiance of *him*. 'Very well, then. I'll come. And then you promise to give me my glove? Not because it's of much

value—even to me; but because I was already thinking of buying another pair of gloves and—and losing *them*, and so—well, that's settled, then.'

At this poor Cecil was more confused and dismayed than he could have imagined possible. He had suddenly become aware of but one small fraction of himself, the dove-grey, suède-clad hand that held his cane. 'I don't see how you can *ever* forgive me,' he blurted with crimson cheeks beneath the green. 'I had no idea—'

'Why, how should you? And there's nothing to forgive as I know of. And now I *must* be off.'

She was gone. Cecil was alone again. As much alone as if he stood high up on a desert island, safe after shipwreck. But gradually the bustle and babel, the sights and sounds and smells of the street returned to his perception. He came to himself, and suddenly realizing the enormity of these proceedings, was utterly at a loss how to look, to move, to free himself, to find his bearings. But the hateful shops at last were left behind him; and, gently forging his course along familiar pavements and yet all but into a world that until that moment he had never even dreamed to exist, he was soon safely home.

Until that now remote day when Cecil had picked up the stranger's glove, his secrets had been chiefly of an inward kind. His outer life, his funny little groping ways and traits and fads and interests and everything he possessed, including his tailor's and hatter's bills—all these Grummumma had shared to the full. Not that she ever openly intruded. Not that she exacted confidence. There are other methods of opening a lock than by forcing it. But apart from that, it is difficult to associate ladies of unusually ample proportions with the activities of the spy. Cecil knew perfectly well, and had been again and

again assured that anything Grummumma might do would always be kindly meant. She invariably had his happiness at heart, and watched over it, too. It was her nature, not only in regard to Cecil but to the world at large. Indeed, those fine black eyes of hers appeared to have so extensive a range that any attempt at concealment or subterfuge would be a mere waste of ingenuity.

What passed within was another matter. By steadily following the path of least resistance, though he was candour and openness itself by impulse, Cecil had tended as he grew up to become more and more secretive concerning anything that happened in his mind. That mind had thus become the queerest of little refuges all his own. To watch him *there* was almost like watching the innocent inmate of a private lunatic asylum or a novice in a nunnery. None the less, this 'closeness' was due, not to the inability to say anything, but to the want of anybody to say all that he wanted *to*. The garden itself was choked to overflowing; at times he felt he *must* jump over its wall and bolt.

So it must have been merely because Grummumma was not interested in his mental states that she now failed to notice anything unusual. She remarked, it is true, at luncheon that morning, glancing at him over a forkful of green peas, that he seemed a little out of sorts.

'If I may venture, Cecil, upon a piece of advice,' she said when the peas had been safely steered to their destination, 'and it is none the worse because, as you know, I have long since acted upon it myself, I should eat a little less *meat*.'

He made no reply; and it was perhaps unfortunate that, as usual, she was unable to see his eyes—eyes now bent on the tiny slice of lamb on his plate and with an expression so innocent of any particular interest in it that

she might for once in her life have been tempted to speculate on what he was thinking about. As a matter of fact, Cecil's whole being was tossing at this moment on a positive sea of the unusual. He *was* incredibly, immeasurably 'out of sorts'. A complete convoy of ideas, fancies, interests, circumstances that had hitherto accompanied him in his voyage from one eternity into another, had simultaneously foundered before his very eyes. Had foundered in an ocean immense, unimaginable, its crested billows of a dazzling whiteness, its arching skies of an unplumbable blue.

It was odd indeed, though he hadn't realized the oddity, that in his *imagination* no effort had been needed to survey whatever dizzy heights and depths might there suddenly reveal themselves. 'Meat'! he had never felt less hungry in his life. How rare an experience to be welcoming Grummumma's advice! He pushed aside untasted his remnant of lamb, and even the three new, innocent, little potatoes that accompanied it on his plate. He regaled himself with the green peas; and it seemed as though every single hour of his life—or at least of all its solitude—had been merely waiting for this morning.

Grummumma—crooking that charming little finger of hers on her plump white hand—having tossed off the last drops of her customary glass of sherry; the crumbs of her Bath Oliver having been already neatly brushed up into a heap on the damask table-cloth—rose at last to her feet.

'This afternoon', she explained with a last hasty brush of her table napkin over her lips, 'I have to see Colonel Sprigge with reference to the Home.' Her Home, that was, for Girls; not the one whose roof so capaciously sheltered herself and the young man still seated at the

table. 'And what are *you* proposing to do?' She archly wagged her head at him.

Cecil's head with its peaked shade, as it slowly veered round in her direction, had a peculiar resemblance to a searchlight, though a searchlight has no cowl.

'I thought, you know,' he said, 'of looking over my arrow-heads. Or I might, perhaps, take another little stroll.'

'Well, my dear boy, no matter,' returned Grummumma in that ample fashion which somehow always seemed to suggest a tinge of magnanimous impatience, 'do exactly what you please. But don't for mercy's sake fatigue your eyes with those dreadfully uninteresting, and I am sure, perfectly murderous, scraps of flint. We can imagine to what dreadful bloodthirsty uses *they* must once have been put. And if you *do* take a walk, keep out of the sun. Tea then, in your own room, at half-past four. If my talk with Colonel Sprigge permits it, I shall be home about six.'

She was gone, silks, voice, presence, and all. And Cecil was left alone with his raspberry tart and cream, and his thoughts. He sat on until he heard the large varnished door emphatically shut. For a few minutes even after that he remained absolutely still in his chair. And then the skirts of the parlour-maid sounded at the door. He rose and, seizing his grey felt hat and his malacca cane, followed Mrs. le Mercier out into the afternoon sunshine.

He had armed himself with the key to the gate of the neighbouring 'Gardens', the freedom of which Grummumma shared with her discreet neighbours. Following a winding, bush-screened, gravel path, he came to a seat beside a patch of ornamental water; and there he sat down.

An immense dejection, hardly due to any heedlessness of diet, had taken possession of him. All that he had intended to say to his stranger—all, rather, that deep down in his mind, even though unexpressed in words, he had hoped to make clear to her—welled up into remembrance. All that he had actually said and done, those clumsy, stuttered speeches, the absurd, motionless way in which he had stood, that conceit about his own silly name, the hideous discourtesy of refusing to share hers after practically asking her to tell him it, all that miserable meaninglessness—the whole scene came flooding back to remembrance.

He did not mind the young woman's thinking him anything she pleased except only the feeble nincompoop he had shown himself to be. The clear, cool voice re-echoed in his mind—her openness, the frank, matter-of-fact tone in which she had claimed the missing glove. He knew exactly how she had stood there, poised and still, searching him with her eyes. Why, he hadn't even offered her his hand when he had said good-bye. Had he even raised his hat? His thoughts whirled impotently in a vortex. He longed to go fumbling off once more into the High Street with the faintest shadow of a hope that she might by a miracle be there. And to think that, when she had appeared, he had been gloating into a hatter's! And now a whole day to go; and that voice echoing on —unnaturally quiet, surely, for her age! Supposing she fell ill, or—why, anything might happen to prevent their meeting again. And he hadn't even the smallest notion where she lived!

Perhaps she was just being kind to him. He was used to that. Why should she really have had the faintest intention of meeting him again, of being made horribly conspicuous by standing there in that vile crowd of sight-

seers talking into a kind of green silk funnel. Perhaps she had just wanted to get rid of him.

No, no. Nothing mattered. He must just wait. Just wait for the chance to put everything right; to *tell* her that nothing mattered, except only that she must not let him be any kind of a trouble or burden; that he would never bother her again. And might he perhaps . . .?

The strained eyes remained tightly shut for a few moments. When they opened again, a solitary swan that had somehow contrived to keep its pride and beauty even in the muddy shallows of this 'ornamental water', had floated in close under the bank, as if in need of company, or possibly of crumbs. Cecil stared at the creature from under his shade. Its virgin snow burned in the sunshine at least as purely as those on the far mountain-tops he would never see. The arched plumes of its wings were softly mantled. Its round eye glittered. Its dark-webbed feet were softly paddling beneath the greenish oil-like water.

It was an awful thing to sit there looking at it, and be so unhappy. Cecil was torn to pieces with longing. He didn't want to live any more. If the first real miracle that had happened in his life could leave him as miserable and dejected as this, what of the rest, of the years that remained? If only he had had a little worldly wisdom, he might at least have known what *not* to say. He could at least have shown the rudiments of courtesy. Why, she must have scarcely any money at all, not enough even to buy a new pair of gloves with, and he had forced the confession of it out of her like the most unutterable of cads!

But there comes an end at last even to self-abasement. A wan and rather sickly smile had spread over Cecil's face as he continued to watch this sequestered bird on the water. He took the scapegoat glove out of his pocket

and examined the little, round, worn hole in the first finger of it. A sigh that was uncommonly like a sob shook him. 'May God bless you for ever and ever!' he muttered in an anguish of sentiment, and pushed it back into his pocket again. And as if the swan had been positively tarrying in the narrow creek beneath him for this precise benediction, it now unruffled its rose-flushed wings and, steering into the blaze of the sun, oared itself out of his sight.

Cecil turned home. There was one thing to be thankful for. He had been given a latch-key—to save the servants. He turned that key very quietly in the lock. It was twenty minutes to five, though how his charming watch had managed to deceive itself into making hours of what had seemed a few minutes completely baffled him.

His tea was awaiting him in the large white sitting-room that adjoined his bedroom. He poured it out—tepid, rich, red-brown, and there under the cover of the dish was the particular kind of scone with a trace of butter on it that he had detested the taste of ever since he could remember. And there too was yesterday's slice of plum cake. And out *there* the chirruping of sparrows. Everything was exactly the same as it had always been; and he himself—gross, clumsy, dull-witted—was merely somebody in a dream that had already come to an end. It was monstrous, this 'life'!

He put down his cup, rose to his feet, tiptoed out of the room, and having reached his dressing table, took up the brushes he found there. But this was pretence of course; he had not come to brush his hair. He had come to see as much as possible of the self that she had seen from top to toe. For a minute or two he stood listening, then raised his face by a painful inch or so to peer in at what was confronting him in the wide mahogany looking-

glass. And almost before the slightest sensation of the agony that would ensue, if he persisted, had made itself felt, almost before he had time to realize the fatuity of the attempt, he had turned abruptly away and was presently nibbling his buttered scone, and, despite Grummumma's warnings of the perils of indigestion, had poured himself out an even richer and redder cup of tea.

The sparrows continued to chirp, the western sunlight to pour into the room. But the waft of steam with its gentle gyrations on the surface had thinned away and the contents of the handsome Dresden cup were stone cold before Cecil came out of his second long reverie that day. It was not a happy reverie; for one tiny memory that had been steadily skulking at the back of his mind had at last gnawed its way out. And the process had left him with a deadly hollow ache beneath his heart. Grummumma might be a jealous goddess, but until this instant Cecil had never been conscious of such pangs. Yet, as he gazed on in memory at the shoes, the skirt, the sleeve, and the bare hand that had for an instant touched his own, he was conscious of but one corroding doubt—that ring!—a ring of discoloured turquoises which he had seen encircling the third finger of that left hand!

Yet when he raised his head at last, something very like serenity had come back into his mind. He would explain everything to-morrow. He would be perfectly calm and collected. He would give back the glove and prove at any rate that he was 'gentleman' enough, however queer a specimen, to withdraw out of this stranger's life with a little more courtesy and less confusion than had accompanied his intrusion into it.

To judge from Grummumma's *sotto voce* remarks to the parlour-maid during their solitary dinner that even-

ing, the consultation with Colonel Sprigge on the affairs of the Home had tried her patience. Apart from this, the courses followed one another in silence. And the occasional diamond-like effects of Grummumma's eyes in her rather wax-like face, owing to this preoccupation, were otherwise engaged than in scrutinizing the young man who sat opposite her.

When, next morning, Cecil glided rapidly past under Mr. Flaxman Smith's drawing-room window, the pretty parlour-maid, glancing down at him, discovered two things, and both of them to her consternation, for to-day was her afternoon out: first, that it looked as if a storm was coming on, and next, that her kitchen clock had once more and quite unaccountably lost at least half an hour.

But it was Cecil who paid for them by finding himself at his trysting place exactly that much before his time. He hated being a spectacle, yet this morning it didn't seem in the least to matter. Waiting gave him the opportunity, too, to get cool again and to recover externally, at any rate, his usual fastidious serenity and aloofness. If only his thoughts would follow suit! If only he could breathe more easily! If only he could for an instant suppose that she would come!

So helpless and motionless the figure of the young man showed at last, standing there like a sentry close up against the private doors of the tobacconist's and the ironmonger's shops, that a tender-hearted young woman, taking him for an unfortunate aristocrat who had come down in the world, actually pressed a threepenny piece into the loose, dangling hand, and then sped rapidly on. Little actions may have large effects. Cecil's icy-hot chagrin had instantly given way to an almost childish amusement. Threepenny-bits are for luck. And Cecil actually lifted the coin to his lips and deliberately spat on it before push-

ing it into his waistcoat pocket. It was money gotten under false pretences. He might at any moment be run in. A shudder of sheer dare-deviltry coursed down his spine. Let come what would—if only it were she! This peculiar smile was still hovering over the lower part of his face when, indeed, the young woman, as punctual as May Day, and as unexpected as a miracle, was suddenly once more in his company; and Cecil found himself in gentle motion at her side.

The grotesquely intense face of the day before could not so much as have hinted at the joy that now radiated from it—from his very finger tips. And but one glance at it affected the mind this young stranger supposed she had 'made up'. None the less, 'Look here, before I go,' she was saying breathlessly, 'I have been thinking over what happened yesterday. And what first I can't understand is why you shouldn't have given me my glove then and there.'

Cecil's fingers holding his cane managed somehow also to clasp tight the threepenny-bit in his waistcoat pocket, while his other hand kept guard on the glove. His good angel was smiling at him from over his narrow shoulder.

Why, you see,' he said with an instinctive little bow that might have graced a Spanish grandee, 'it seemed so horribly public, and I knew you hated being looked at. Besides, you said I might keep it. Of course', he added as if almost driven into a corner, 'I ought to have gone straight off to the Police.'

'The Police, *that* thing! The things you say! Still, I *do* say you must have picked it up very, very quickly. I came back the next moment to look for it, and there was nothing and nobody there—besides all this, I mean. It seems so very odd to me you didn't *notice* who had been

so stupid. I am always losing things; though I really don't see why I should be reminded of it by—by strangers.' There was a pause, and then in a flash, and sharp as a dart, came the question: 'Had you ever seen me before?'

Cecil faltered. 'If you are going to be angry,' he said, 'I don't think I shall be able to do or say anything at all. All I want is just to try and explain myself and to give you the glove back. At least I don't, I mean, *want* to do that, but must. It was hateful of me to keep it. You see, I hardly know anybody, though that is not why—I wanted to know *you*. I had never, never seen you before, on my oath—and now . . . I suppose you'd hardly believe it possible but—since then, I have thought of *nobody*, of *nothing* else.'

The dark, attentive eyes had slipped over his delightfully tasteful apparel, head to heel. How little it told her! And yet that 'I don't know why', and the quiet, restful sigh that had followed his last words had suddenly stilled the cautious, suspicious mind within.

'You don't know anybody! Then in that case how can you possibly *want* to know anybody you know absolutely nothing about? Why it's broad—' and again she could have bitten her tongue off at such clumsiness—'you haven't even', she rapidly corrected herself, 'asked me who I am. Quite the contrary. What is more, I can't stop talking to you in this hateful mob of people. Probably you don't know how they stare—and don't care. But I *have* got appearances to keep up.'

'That's just it, that's just it,' cried the young man as if in the depths of despair. 'I care enormously. I loathe them. Isn't there *any*where we could go to be quiet for a moment? I only just want to say, however absurd it may sound, that I *do* know you—I didn't know I

could ever know anybody so well, and that it was utterly mean of me not to give you back your glove at once. And to keep you like this being stared at! Oh, if you only knew how I detest these horrible legs scissoring round us, you would at least realize I didn't mean to do *that*.'

A curious, crooked expression—expectation, incredulity, longing, dismay—hung over the face he couldn't see.

'Look here,' she said, 'I didn't mean to be a pig about it. I don't suppose—' she flung back her head a little—'I don't suppose you have ever so much as guessed that you are not the only young fellow loafing about on the "Parade". It is hateful to talk here, and I'd like to explain a little, too. What's more, by God's help it happens to be early-closing day. I'm in a linen-draper's shop, you know—serve out the gloves I can't afford to buy. There is the river. Shall we go there? But I mustn't be very long.'

At least a dozen considerations came cluttering into Cecil's mind. To become the busiest of conspirators needs very little practice in conspiring. There was Grummumma, there was luncheon. There were the private gardens. There were the grounds of the Rectory at the corner where you turn in by the bridge to the towpath. To put anything off might be absolute disaster. Above everything in this world he wanted not to be remembered as one of the young fellows on the Parade. That vista appalled him—though he hardly knew why. Skunks, musk-rats, and boa-constrictors couldn't have a nastier flavour. Could he possibly get to the river without being seen? Could he possibly take *any*thing of a look round? And supposing.... And then, in an instant, nothing seemed to matter. He was at peace and at ease.

'I can walk quite fairly fast,' he replied cheerfully, 'if

you would just let me keep what I can see of you in the corner of my eye while we are crossing the road. May it be the river?'

It must be confessed there was no extravagant oddity in the outward appearance of the two of them as, busily talking, they steered their way across from Messrs. Ewart & Sons, the ironmongers, to the corner a little beyond the Post Office, and then on down Unicorn Street round by the sawmills. Furtively skirting the Bagshot orchard, they presently found themselves breathing the cool but stagnant sweetness of the air by the river. Its meadows on the further side were fringed with drifts of fool's parsley; and on this were tented with round leafy verdant lime trees; while nearer the water, glassing themselves in its flowing dark, hung the whispering green-grey of pollard willows.

Why this young stranger hurried quickly past a seat with a sloping back to it no more than a pace or two from the water and under an Eden-like bower which the authorities had somehow refrained from polling, and why she chose instead a low, hard one of oak full in the thinning glare of the sun, Cecil did not even attempt to guess. His only hope was to postpone for an hour or so the thunderstorm which was obviously completing its preparations; to say all that he wanted to say; and to hear as much as possible of what he longed to hear before it was too desperately near the stroke of one.

Here, then, these two seated themselves. And she herself, her bare hands, on either side of her, clasped on the edge of the hot wood, her narrow face now averted, now swiftly glancing at him, at once began talking so fast that he could scarcely find breath enough to follow her up.

'I don't really want to know who you are,' she said

once more. 'I don't see that it matters; at least not to me. Not a bit. I *believe* you about the glove. I don't believe you have told me anything that is not the truth. So if you *do* make anything up—just taradiddles, you know—you may as well realize that I shall probably believe you. Then it will be *my* responsibility. And yet—well, I don't think somehow you will do that either; though I shouldn't blame you if you did. *I* never knew any that didn't, anyhow. If you'd like to keep the glove, why keep it. There's not very much in this world that seems to *me* much worth troubling about. They don't even *want* to mean what they say. But if anyone had told me two or three days ago that I should be sitting here with you this morning, when I had promised to—to go out with a cousin of mine, well—' the dark eyes continued to brood over the now strangely shadowed meadows on the further bank of the river, 'well, what I say is, that's *my* business. I'm free to do what I like, I suppose, whatever they may say. Still, you *are* rather—rather out of the usual, you know.'

And yet, though she had all but implored Cecil not to tell her who he was, 'or anything like that', he was presently pouring out very little else. As usual, his mind began to hunt about in what she had been saying like a terrier suddenly let loose in a rabbit warren. Where next, and where next? Perhaps it was the echo in his mind of the word 'cousin' that at last made an end to these confessions. His lips closed a little tighter.

'This is a horribly personal question,' he faltered, 'and you need not answer it of course if you feel you don't want to; but would you perhaps mind telling me—' he pointed a forefinger to within an inch of the turquoises that showed bluer, it seemed, because of the bleached grey of the wood that surrounded the finger which they

encircled, 'would you mind telling me if you are engaged to be married?'

His companion positively gasped. A crimson flush mounted up into her cheek. She buried her hands in her lap. 'And so you *think*,' she cried, stooping forward over them, her head twisted awry almost under the very rim of his unsightly eye-shade, 'you *think* I should be sitting here with you if the man I was engaged to was waiting to—to go out with me? My God! It just shows what horrible mistakes one can make. I don't say a girl shouldn't do as she pleases,' she went on even more rapidly, and stooping closer over her lap, her eyes fixed straight in front of her on the worn green grass at their feet. 'I *am* free to do just what I like. But if you think—after what you have said—that I would do a thing like that—when I positively kept my promise to the very minute to be fool enough, after all I've gone through, to come and wait *there* for you in the street—well, all I can say is, I understand exactly the *kind* of old lady the one you say you live with *is*.'

Apart from anything else this impassioned speech might imply, it shot a bleaker shaft of light on Grummumma than Cecil even in his most discontented moments had so much as conceived possible. Grummumma! —somehow to get rid of her, to put her exactly in her right place seemed to be his only way of escape, or at any rate the only possible way of keeping this explosive, enigmatic stranger sitting here beside him in this paradise amid the encircling gloom for just a few minutes longer.

'I assure you, I swear to you', he said, 'that she is not so bad as that. She has been immensely kind to me. How would *you* like to have to take charge, or whatever you like to call it, of a person who, who—well, like *me*! I realize of course you must hate the thought of being *seen*

with me. You needn't suppose I don't know what they have done for me in making me like this. But I swear, I *swear* I always supposed a ring on the third finger of anybody's left hand *meant* an engagement.' He groped round as if his mind were absorbed in an inextricable mathematical problem. 'And after all it *is* on your left hand!'

A dead silence fell between them. The hands in the worn blue-serge lap tightly clasped themselves together; that was all. The young woman never stirred.

'Wasn't that funny of me?' an almost unrecognizable voice a minute or so afterwards questioned him. 'Goodness! if I *was* engaged to my cousin—though this particular he happens to be a she—why, pray, *shouldn't* I be sitting here putting things right with you and keep him waiting a bit? I have precious little time to myself. I've had my fill of what they really want. And he wouldn't keep me long engaged if he made a fuss about that, *I* can tell you. I just—if you must know the truth—I wear this ring *now* because I prefer to be alone. I'm sick of the way they—well, *that's* why. And now, please don't think I am asking this for any—for any horrible motives; but if you *did* see this thing on my finger yesterday, why didn't you give me back my glove?'

In the comparatively few years of his secluded existence, Cecil had become thoroughly accustomed to being catechized. But not exactly like this. And now, unlike most such little experiences in the past, his one aim and desire at this moment was to share with his inquisitor every single little bit of the truth that was in him. He succeeded in this so admirably at length that the two of them had soon abandoned all misgivings and reserve and were chasing together every least little thought and experience that happened to poke up its happy head in the wilderness of their minds.

It was a wilderness that had begun to blossom like the rose. They had discovered the solitude only two can share. By now, indeed, not a single human soul was to be seen near at hand. And for obvious reasons.

But though Cecil was capable of leaping blindly to conclusions on what for most people would be the most inadequate grounds, though but one glance at the sullen surface of the water, one moment's attention to the torpid hush that was now hanging its ever-thickening veils around them, would instantly have warned him of what was coming, he was far too intent on other things to heed. And his companion didn't care. Never, never could either of them have guessed what an immense reservoir of living water had lain treasured up and concealed in memory. One twist of the fingers that now lay unfolded in the stranger's lap beneath his very eyes—why, even that empty glove—had suddenly turned on the tap. It seemed the flood would never cease.

As for herself, a courageous, if not dare-devil heedlessness of the future was her unrealized philosophy. She knew well enough what they were in for. It was there before her eyes, in her blood, in her brain, in every nerve. She was its centre, its very eye. And the sudden dartings of her dark glances to and fro drank in the complete menace of the scene with avidity.

As she herself had repeatedly hinted, 'young fellows' of the utmost assurance and aplomb were to be found in full display morning and night, parading the pavements of the High Street. And yet this young man who now shared the river seat with her, with whom she was actually talking indeed as if they had shared the same nursery, had somehow managed to stay clean outside that dashing category. He was as different in appearance, in talk, in

manners, in the complete, odd effect he had on her mind, as a coral island is from darkest Africa.

She knew 'a thing or two' as well as any thing or two *can* be known. And the knowledge had sufficed for most little crises in what had been a fairly lively but what could hardly have been described as a lavish existence. She had even confessed to Cecil only a moment or so ago that though the cousin already mentioned had had nothing to do with it, except as a confidante, she had herself already been, as she supposed, more than once in love. Just to say it all quite easily like that seemed somehow to prove how irremediably *out* of love she was now. The confession seemed to be its own absolution. And yet, with another sudden flaming of colour in her cheek, she had easily managed to refrain from expressing her sentiments concerning the young man who had been responsible for the last experiment.

She could at least play fair even on behalf of a creature who hadn't the least notion of what the phrase meant. And she had twisted what had first sprung to her lips into: 'I didn't see as how I *could* go on caring for him. There isn't much in me, but I do believe in trying to be —if you understand what I mean—all of oneself there is. It was no fault of his, not at least that he'd know of, but—' once more the deep, dark, and tragic eyes stole over the louring meadows that lay beyond the water, 'well, there, you may think me a beast, if you like, but I came at last to hate him. Oh, how I hated him! It's gone now; it's over; and yet it has dyed me through and through. At least so I thought until—I didn't see *what* could come of it, I mean, but just a sort of suffocation if . . .'

Cecil had waited patiently for the end of the sentence.

'Well, if we had got married,' she added, as if the word meant hanged-drawn-and-quartered. 'Not that I sup-

pose we ever should have been. It sounds awful, I know, as my friend said at the time; but I don't care even if it does. I am *glad* it' . . . Again she broke off, as if in sudden dread of her own impetuosity. 'There! that's all, that's all! I can't go back. No one could ask me to. And the fixed wide eyes which the rejected young man had never really seen, and Cecil couldn't, were the very straightest of witnesses to the honesty of her tongue.

When at least half a dozen thoughts are entangled together in one's mind, it is difficult to express any. And Cecil had been utterly unable to make any comment on this statement before the young woman had swiftly dropped the clue. She could not imagine why her cheeks hadn't the sense to keep their natural pallor this morning; it wasn't a habit of theirs to go on in this silly fashion. Yet why on earth should it matter *what* they did, when that funny green shade prevented anybody worth looking at them from seeing them.

'Here I am,' her voice ran on breathlessly, in broken cadences up and down its scale—a clear challenging voice; 'here I am, talking and talking, yet you are telling me nothing at all about yourself. And soon there won't be another chance.'

'Another chance!' cried Cecil in guttural tones. 'You mean you won't see me again? You can't mean that! Why, here I am, seeing you now—if,' he added dismally, 'if seeing is the right word to use. And yet I still keep on saying to myself, "It's not the ten thousandth part." Please do try and understand: I want to see *you—you*. Oh, your very self. You couldn't have meant that.'

'*Me*?' returned a faint and rather shaken voice. 'Me! there's nothing in *me*. Besides', and the tones flattened a little in spite of the fact that a faint smile had crept into her eyes, 'that would be seeing me double.'

'I said it. I mean it,' said Cecil stubbornly. 'I don't believe it would be possible for me ever to know you enough. Everything you say leads me on as if, oh, into another world, and even this one—I can't explain. I never knew there was such a place to be in as where we are now and yet', it was as if a sudden light had flooded his mind, 'what you have said as yet has been nothing but —sign-posts.'

The dark eyes pondered. 'I think', she said, 'if I thought you were not meaning every syllable you say I should never hold up my head again.'

The thin, delicate face was now averted; the narrow left hand, as if purely of its own volition, had turned itself palm upward on her knee. Even a young man twenty times less accustomed to looking down than Cecil might have noticed it. But if he did, he made no movement. He merely sat a little stiller.

'Mean? You!' he said, as if in utter perplexity. 'Why, even to be seen with a creature like me must be a—an imposition.' His head stared round on its shoulders. 'I assure you', he said with a sudden gleam of humour, 'it's an imposition even to me.'

Hardly had the little rill of answering laughter sounded out in the sullen air when a headlong rush of wind swept over the motionless meadows that lay opposite to them, turning their rich seeding brown to a livid green, and sweeping the waters of the river into a rippled shield of beaten metal. Dry leaves were flying in it. The tree above them was swept as if by one vast, multitudinous sigh. There came a pause; and then out of the blue-black, cloud-vaulted heavens above their heads, a thin river of light suddenly flickered, like the fangs of a serpent. And as if at a signal, the solid globe beneath this day-benighted couple shook beneath a rattling crash of thunder.

Of the two, the young man must have been the least prepared for this assault. He showed not the faintest trace of being startled, however. He just quietly laid his hand on the upturned palm and in his haste almost whispered, 'Quick, how high is the tree above us? I don't know this place. You are frightened. Where shall I take you? Quick!'

The fingers beneath his remained perfectly passive. The laughter that came in reply seemed almost as meaningless as a child's, and as full of gaiety.

'It's the littlest tree I've ever seen,' she answered, 'and the loveliest. Green and round and bushy, like a toy tree. And they go on like a row of umbrellas right along the bank. So unless they are really aiming at us up there, nothing will matter. Frightened! Please, please understand, I love it all. It's only the rain I am thinking of. What happens to me never, never matters. But what will your—what will the lady you spoke to me about think if you get back wet through?'

'Will you *please* not talk like that. Please not to. It's you I am thinking of, and—'

'And here it comes,' cried the young woman triumphantly. Her 'it' was neither lightning nor thunder, but a dense league-long veil, part hail, part rain, that had now come sweeping over the all but blotted-out expanse of country before her eyes. Its *avant-couriers* smote ferociously and with a clear *tap*, *tap*, *tap* on Cecil's silk shade. The wind swept over them as if it were perceptibly condensed against their bodies. An enormous confusion filled the air.

And then, well, indeed you never knew what this odd young man would be doing next. At this moment he was unbuttoning his coat. 'You must take this,' he was saying; 'you have got only the flimsiest things on. Why I can see your arm through the silk.'

'Please, please', she cried catching both his wrists in her entreaty, 'don't do anything so utterly stupid. Oh please—just think! Whatever would they say! And you'll get your death of cold. Look now, see, we'll get round to the other side. There. Do you realize it's a lime tree over us; and it's coming into flower. There's nothing to do—nothing, I *swear*—but just to stay here quietly underneath it until the rain's over.'

Quite apart from the haste with which she had panted these sentences, the clamour of the storm now almost drowned her voice. But actions speak louder than words. Cecil struggled no more. And the two of them cowered as close as they could against the dark smooth bole of the young linden tree now tenting her bright green branches over their heads.

When Nature is in one of her passing fits of hysteria, poor little humans must just sit still and smile. Nevertheless, any chance observer of one of these young faces, and of all that was visible of the other, would hardly have described them as smiling. There is a happiness of the spirit that seems to draw an almost grotesque mask over human features, that distorts and makes strange and absurd and yet seems to irradiate them, as if they were merely of glass made for a light to show through.

The next few days of Cecil's life were spent in bed and were at the same time (so far as his mind was concerned), the most active, the most wretched yet rapturous, and the longest he had ever known. The lime tree had proved to be an imperfect umbrella. Cecil had hastened home at last through the rain-washed streets—blindingly silver-bright in the sunshine—in an amazed happiness, on tenterhooks of anxiety, and soaked to the skin.

Grummumma had listened steadily on to his rambling explanations, at the same time rapidly comparing his at-

tempts at chronology with the dining-room clock. Though he had an advantage denied to most men, in that his tell-tale eyes were concealed, Cecil hadn't the makings of a skilful prevaricator. This unusual eloquence in so reticent a young man was suspicious. Grummumma, like an immense well-fed cat at a mouse's hole, watched his lips and his hands as he sat there, attempting to swallow his belated luncheon without exhibiting too obvious an effort. But whatever speculations she may have pursued within, remained unexpressed. She was all credulity and indulgence. Even when next morning she stood over him, clinical thermometer between finger and thumb, and announced that his temperature was 101°, she refrained from any 'I told you so.' After all, the mouse was safely in its hole again, and there would be ample time to find out where it had been straying.

The storm was followed—a rather unusual caprice in an English summer—by a spell of happy, halcyon weather. The patient, however, lying there on his back in his beautiful brass bed, the blinds at the window all but shrouding his room, his shade over his eyes, enjoyed it only at second hand. When Mrs. le Mercier was not either giving him his physic or sitting over him while he consumed milk pudding, his cousin Eirene was. She, however, was the more restless nurse of the two, and again and again would interrupt the *Cranford* she was reading to him in order to mince over to the window and peep out at the day.

'You can't think how lovely it is,' she would cry gaily over her shoulder. 'It's a *thousand* pities, you poor thing. And I simply can't imagine why you didn't take shelter in a shop. You always go that way, don't you, Cecil?'

And once more Cecil would be compelled to remember the precise terms of the rather fantastic little story he

had invented to explain his sousing, a story received by Eirene with a variety of reactions. After what was perhaps the fifth attempt to glean a little further information, she returned to his bedside and, so to speak, took the bull by the horns.

'What Auntie, you know, has perfectly made up her mind about *now* is that you really want somebody to take more care of you. And I am going to be one of the "somebodies". You are getting mopish, Cecil. You just shut yourself up away from everybody, though you *know* how sympathetic we all can't help being. And what's more, I believe you make things out worse than they are, just to spoil yourself a little. The doctor was saying only the other day that even if it *is* a little painful, you ought to try ever so little to—you know what I mean—to *make* yourself better.'

'My eyes, you mean?' interjected Cecil from his pillow.

'And aren't our eyes', cried Eirene brightly, 'almost, as it were, ourselves? Why, *you* see things that I have never even noticed at all. It's quite, quite wonderful. Still, you mustn't mind my speaking out a little, even though you never seem to be really listening to half I say. You couldn't tell me a single word about that last chapter I have been reading, now could you? And I can't bear reading aloud, especially in a room like a vault.'

Cecil remained perfectly still in his bed. 'You have been kindness itself, Eirene,' he replied in a flattish voice; 'and it's hateful to keep you here. Do please take a little rest. And—and might I have half an hour's more *Cranford after* dinner?'

'Well, if I must, I must, you naughty boy. But promise me, if I do, that you'll get a little sleep. We all do so much want to help you all we can. It's *so* difficult—just groping in the dark.'

There was almost a hint of tears in her voice, and she stooped prettily, though not very far down, as if to blow him a kiss right in underneath the green shade, for as a matter of fact she had always felt a peculiar disinclination to confront those hidden eyes. How was she to tell, then, if her incipient kiss had reached its destination? She eyed the long, green-cowled hummock mistrustfully. 'And you've *promised* to turn over a new leaf?' she concluded.

The door gently closed, and the rack on which Cecil lay resumed its more leisurely activities. Of all the rats that were gnawing at his mind, one was never for a moment satisfied—what must his stranger be thinking of him now? With unprecedented presence of mind, his last words had been that he would be found edging along around the shop-end of the Crescent at a quarter past eleven every morning, *ad infinitum*. Just about then, it appeared, would be her only chance of a few free minutes except in the evenings, and on Thursdays; and even they were precarious. Why, Cecil had not attempted to find out.

Sheer instinct had told him that circumstances had never been very kind to her. He realized she must be 'poor', and the very sound of the word sent him rushing away from it in his mind as fast as ever he could. From infancy he had been lapped in comparative luxury, and the merest suspicion that beneath Luxury's silken skirts were concealed two bony knees, filled him with incredible dismay. None the less he knew with the immense assurance of mere faith that somehow or other she was not going to be poor for very long; that he was going to just sweep those circumstances up into a pile and burn them.

There never was a more helpless creature than him-

self; he knew that, too. And yet, once or twice in his life he had determined to have his own way, and this was going to be another time. But how see her? How keep his tryst? How write to her? How let her have but one word to show that it was only a silly old temperature and a Grummumma and a doctor and a quick-witted nimble-tongued cousin that were for the moment keeping him away?

He had so many times re-explored in imagination that hour by the river that he now knew every inch of it by heart. And what is more, huddling there beside her under the linden tree, he had actually managed to speak of his infirmity. It was the one thing in the world his tongue hated and detested having anything to do with. Still, it had somehow stumbled out; and the ordeal had not only proved an immeasurable relief but had also won an immeasurable reward.

'Think worse of you for *that*! Oh, what an utter meanness you must feel in me! Why, all along I have almost hoped you were *blind*; for then, you see, I might have been of help, though I don't quite see how—*if* ever I mean, we *are* going to meet again. "Worse", indeed! I'd ask the thunder just to swallow me up if I even so much as thought you thought it.'

Her face had been turned away from him as she spoke; and the grass at his feet, studded with small, snow-white daisies and here and there a yellow dandelion, had showed a wild, violent green beneath yet another riot of lightning.

But why did that particular 'blind' still make his heart stand still with delight, while Eirene's nattier little pronunciation of the word just now, rankled in his side like a poisoned arrow? Could anything be odder? And what, indeed, was the matter with Eirene?

Two days ago she was just a first cousin much removed, waiting for him like a lightship, so to speak, irremovably in the offing, both a warning and an eventual refuge against all life's storms. He had always known that if nobody more satisfactory turned up for her Eirene would probably decide to marry him. Grummumma had often spoken about it, quite plainly, however playfully; and since Cecil had always hated thinking of the future, he habitually left that future to wait until the present caught up with it.

And now the present had actually done so. And he knew as well as if it had been written down on paper, first that Eirene had suddenly made up her mind—just as if *his* chill had been *her* conflagration, and next, that he had also made up his own. He didn't know exactly how he could manage to persuade his stranger to accept for the time being about two-thirds of his modest income. But it was his, and he was going to do so, and by sheer logic Eirene was therefore *not* going to marry him.

And then, Cecil had suddenly stopped thinking and had actually found himself attempting to put Eirene's advice into practice. Hands clenched, heart pounding, pulses drumming, he was endeavouring, if only by the remotest fraction of an inch, to raise these abject eyes of his in their sockets. A horrible sweat broke out on his forehead. He was shivering from head to foot. He persisted, none the less, until it seemed the very brain beneath his skull was splitting into fragments, and incandescent stars and arrows of light were raining out of the darkness. And then, poor spoiled invalid, he flung himself over on to his pillow, and turning his back upon paradise, wept with rage and chagrin.

When calm returned, there returned with it, hungry as ever, the same old rat. How was he ever to assure the

stranger that he was not—well, just another 'young fellow'? And once more the words that had haunted him repeated themselves over and over again in his mind: 'I came at last to hate him—to hate him.' He lay there—stiff and still. Grummumma's step was sounding on the stair; the First Wardress was approaching. Despair swept over him. The nameless, longed-for one must in sober fact be hating *him* with all her heart and soul this very moment.

But Grummumma (followed by the parlour-maid carrying on a silver salver a dish of sole and a glass of hock), was bringing him, apart from these dainties, news which proved at least that, however extreme that hatred might now be, it was not going to prevent the young people from meeting again. First, she assured him he was much better. That being so, she paid very little attention to the grey, damp underpart of the face that lay on the pillow, though even the hair on that pillow was dank with sweat. Being better, he might sit up this afternoon and come down to-morrow. And the afternoon after that he was to receive a visitor. 'And I wonder, my dear boy, if you can guess who that will be?'

There had been only the faintest trill on the 'that', yet at sound of it his heart stood still. 'Is it Canon Bagshot?' he muttered stonily.

'Him, too,' breathed Grummumma, 'but who else?'

'Eirene's not going away, is she?'

'Not quite yet,' smiled Grummumma. 'But then, Cecil, she is coming back for good'.

'I give it up,' said Cecil. 'And anyhow I should much prefer to be left alone.'

'My dear boy,' replied Grummumma, with that hint of unction in her voice she could never keep out of her kindest remarks, 'you would always prefer to be left alone.

And what do you mean by that, may I ask? Left alone with whom? There are limits surely to one's poor little self. I agree you are tied. But, as Eirene was saying, how long is it since you have made any effort to undo the knot?'

Cecil made no reply.

'You have unnumbered blessings,' went on the philanthropist. 'Solicitous friends, a little income of your own. And though I agree the handicap has been extreme; yes, Cecil, you even have brains. And people with brains, my dear boy, don't dash their heads against brick walls; don't fly into silly entanglements out of which even the most clear-sighted minds find it difficult to extricate themselves. You *make* little difficulties. And as Dr. Lodge agrees, and indeed as specialist after specialist has assured me, a physical habit is bound to reflect itself in the mind, and also, no doubt, in the heart. And if in our various spheres of society we have not a certain amount of proper respect for things as they are; if, that is, we don't draw the line somewhere, the consequent difficulties merely end in disaster. And *do*, my dear boy, show *some* little appreciation of that delicious looking sole before it is stone cold on the dish. No; I didn't mean to be led away into a discussion on the physical side'—she flickered in a charmingly helpless fashion her little, fat, ringed hand in the air—'I know nothing of all that. All that I merely wanted to tell you was that I have invited a young lady—a friend of yours—to *tea*.'

'A young lady—a friend of *mine*?' Cecil mumbled, as if incredulous of such a marvel.

'Exactly that,' cried Grummumma brightly. 'She is an assistant in that large new draper's, poor thing; and, considering the practice she has, I must say she writes a charmingly illegible hand.'

Cecil plunged clean into the deep end of the bath prepared for him. 'I am delighted,' he said.

'About the handwriting?' inquired Grummumma.

'That she is coming to tea,' said Cecil.

'In my young days, gallantry would have suggested *suggesting* that Miss Simcox should come to tea. Wasn't it in the nature of things that we should wish to know her —after you had met, well, as you did meet. You must have realized long ago that I am never likely to be a stickler for *mere* conventions. Why, then, may I ask, have you been hiding the young lady under your bushel?' The voice was almost prattling in its geniality.

Cecil took a gulp of hock before replying. 'Why, Grummumma, since you have asked her to tea, I don't see where the bushel comes in?'

The black handsome eyes had fixed their whole attention on his lips. 'But why not at *your* suggestion, Cecil? It was *that* I was asking.'

'But surely, Grummumma, one's invitations are pleasanter when they are given on one's own initiative. Yours must be, I am sure.' The water was proving more buoyant than he had expected.

'My dear!' she acquiesced. 'Then why didn't *you* indulge in one? I find no difficulty in believing that Miss Simcox would have come to tea on Friday with even greater alacrity and pleasure if my poor little note had been in your handwriting.'

'You didn't call on her, then?' mumbled Cecil.

'I proposed to myself the pleasure of her calling on *me*,' replied Grummumma. 'And to whom, my dear boy, do you owe what I am sure must be this charming acquaintance?'

Cecil never lied. And a kind of nausea at the thought of any further fencing or prevarication suddenly swept over

him. If the fat was already in the fire, why shouldn't he set it blazing? He sat up on his bed prim and stiff, his snowy pillows for background; 'I *believe*', he stolidly replied, 'I just woke up.'

'Charming! my dear Cecil, most romantic. But my actual question', Grummumma persisted equably, 'was, to *whom* do we owe it?'

Cecil jerked up even a little higher and the shade tilted itself almost to the angle of the peak of a guard's signalling lamp. But, if anything, and in spite of it, the light beneath was red rather than green.

'To whom *does* one owe any kind of awakening? Why sometimes, I suppose'—and the voice had fallen flat and cold—'to sheer, downright Providence.'

'I must ask Canon Bagshot to give us an address one Sunday on false gods, Cecil. You might learn a little more of the other One—by sheer force of contrast.'

There was a pause.

'Will Eirene be here?' Cecil inquired at last, his head now lowered again over his clammy sole.

Mrs. le Mercier's kid-clad right foot was at this moment beating softly on Cecil's deep-piled bedroom carpet. It was her method of purring. She was looking at the china on the luncheon tray and smiling gently, as if consciousness were just over the border of a charming reverie. Then she laid her other little card on the table, patly and finally, since sooner or later it would almost certainly have to be disclosed. 'Why yes, Eirene will be with us—would make a point of being with us. Hasn't she the positive privilege? Even if it were not a pleasure, dear boy, to share your friends, it would be little short of a duty. And Miss Bolsover is coming too. It will be quite a pleasant little party for Miss—Miss Simcox.'

She paused once more, but this time paused in vain.

'Go on then, my dear boy, as fast as ever you can, getting *better*!' she harangued him. 'The removal of almost every little misfortune in this life, except those that come from above, is merely a question of time.'

Cecil sat up (physically speaking), and as she had prognosticated, that afternoon, and he went downstairs the next. But so assiduous were those who watched over his convalescence that, except after he had blown out his candle for the night, he was not for a moment left to mope alone. One can mope to some little purpose, however, in the gayest of company.

During the forty-eight hours that succeeded the sole, apart from those which passed in restless sleep, he enjoyed not a single moment of peace of mind. Nor was the faintest chance given him of bringing his inward conflict into the open. Short of speaking out, which every nerve in him forbade, he might drag one red herring after another across the trail in the hopes of leading Grummumma on. But she seemed to have lost all interest in the chase. How had she found him out? Did he talk in his sleep? How had she discovered Miss Simcox's name—and where she lived? What, *what* had she said to her? But Grummumma positively refused to budge. She believed that silence was best. Miss Simcox was never even mentioned again.

At a quarter to five, however, on the day before the tea party, and when Eirene was in charge, Cecil made his first and only frontal attack. His feverish cold had left its marks behind it. There was something unusually invalidish in the look of the young man when, without the faintest preparation, he suddenly blurted out his challenge. 'I want—' he said, 'Miss Simcox's address?'

'Cecil!' cried his remote cousin in unconcealed amazement, 'you don't even know so much as her address!'

'No,' said Cecil, 'not so much as her address. And I want to write to her *now*.'

'But, *my dear*, the creature will be here to-morrow afternoon. Surely you need not be so intemperate as all that.'

The young man sat as still as a draper's model in his armchair. 'I don't know what you mean by "intemperate",' he said, 'and I don't much care. The point is, I want to write to her. And I want you to give me the chance of doing so when Grummumma is not here. What's more, Eirene, if you breathe a word of what I am saying to a living soul—then, I assure you, you will regret it.'

Eirene had never before heard trumpets in her cousin's voice and had never before noticed that he sometimes sat so motionless as to resemble not exactly granite, but at least Portland stone. Her hands clasped themselves in her lap. 'I think it's perfectly monstrous of you', she cried lamentably, 'to talk to me like that. Why, you are threatening me, Cecil! And who am I, may I ask, to be a skulking go-between? A nice kind of a creature this friend of yours must be to reduce you to that. I simply flatly refuse. Besides, I don't *know* her address.'

'How did Grummumma find her out?' said Cecil. 'Did *you* help?'

'My Heavens!' shrilled Eirene. 'And now you accuse me of being a spy! As if any one like you isn't conspicuous a mile off. Even a shop-girl might have known that. I expect she did.'

'And do you suppose I *mind* having been seen?' cried Cecil furiously. 'But I'm not going to argue about that. You are merely misleading me. Please keep to the point. You swear you haven't her address?'

'I will swear nothing,' said Eirene. 'It isn't right. I

say I haven't her address. And I simply don't care *where* she is—or ever will be.'

'Then I believe you,' said Cecil out of a horrible vacancy and yet as if he were conferring a royal favour. 'But please understand, if you repeat a single word of what I said just now to any one—well—we shall both of us be sorry for it.'

Eirene rose to her feet. 'To think', she sobbed, 'that I should live to listen to this. Why, you must have known her for ages. She has corrupted every vestige of nice feeling you ever had. And you sit there without caring a fig what I suffer. I detest the very sight of you.' She broke into a renewed flood of tears, and hastened out of the room.

Strangely enough, though her last remark was intended to be the truth, the frail creature had suddenly discovered that she was as near as she ever would be to being in love. In her frantic haste to be alone with her rage and resentment, she managed to push past Grummumma, who attempted to intercept her in the hall. She managed even to refrain from enlightening that lady regarding the cause of the little scene she had been too late to interrupt. Grummumma, however, was by nature and habit a sagacious woman and knew when to hold back. To have succeeded in pumping a little emotion into Eirene was almost as much of an achievement as to have succeeded in pumping whatever she had managed to pump into the mind of Miss Simcox. She awaited her little tea party with folded hands.

And almost before Cecil had any opportunity to realize that the tournament had begun, it was over. The odds had been appalling. The only ally of the young stranger had scarcely uttered a word. With eyes fixed now on the floriations of the drawing-room carpet, and

now on Canon Bagshot's ecclesiastical boots, Cecil had sat mutely listening to the talk. Indeed, no better prize could be offered in recognition of Grummumma's tactics than the fact that never at any moment was there any real opening for him. No kind of social gathering from a school treat to a *tête-à-tête* with a philanthropic duchess could exhaust Canon Bagshot's finesse. And Mrs. le Mercier had all her life apparently been an authority on the grievances of shop-assistants. Eirene, with her puffy hair, elegant hands, and pale, fine features, merely held a watching brief, though she saw to it that their guest was never without the creamiest and the chocolatest of the cakes for tea—just to give her something to do with her fingers while she tried to hold her own with her tongue.

As for 'dear Miss Bolsover', she rolled her blue eyes and occasionally tapped with her blunt-toed shoe (but rather like a dog thumping its tail stump than a cat purring), and remained tactful to the last degree. If the parlour-maid had been given three guesses as to which of the party in the drawing-room had been responsible for the presence of the young lady in black in its midst, Miss Bolsover would almost certainly have been given the glory of being the last runner-up.

And the dark young lady herself—poor Cecil writhed in the consciousness that the fatal hindrance to any possibility of her enjoying this little parlour game was his own share in it. There was a cold, clear ring in her voice, as different from the others as a silver bugle is from a bassoon. She was being flayed alive, of course, as dexterously as a professional Chinese could have managed it. But then life, even the few years she had enjoyed of it, had more or less accustomed her to the process. And it is miraculous how swiftly Nature can produce new skins. Besides, how much easier it is to endure any kind of tor-

ture, even that of tongues, in a good cause! And good cause it must be, since it was poor Cecil's, sitting there as dumb as a fish, and that out of water, in his dark-green shade. That he could hardly boast of being much in the way of a 'young fellow' was proved by the elegant company she was keeping. That he therefore needed her championship the more was somehow proved by the fact that Canon Bagshot was at this moment urbanely stooping over her with a second cup of tea.

'I garther, then, Miss Simcox, the Roman Cartholic Church is a little less intrusive than it is usually assumed to be.'

'Though not, it seems,' interrupted Grummumma, 'to the extent of allowing you to join a Guild in connection with a Sister Establishment. Otherwise, I understand, you are free to believe pretty much what you prefer.'

Miss Simcox was at this moment doing her utmost to appear at her ease with a cup of tea in one gloved hand and the cream-clogged éclair that Eirene had hospitably palmed off on her with the other. 'Oh no, not *believe*,' she cried almost brightly. 'I thought you were referring to what it would be good for me to *do*.'

'And surely', mused Grummumma persuasively, 'actions speak louder than words.'

'But that's a proverb, isn't it?' suggested her visitor doubtfully. 'I remember once hearing some one say that very thing to Father Browne; I forget what about.' At her glance, Canon Bagshot hastily resumed the smile that had begun to fade away across his face.

'And what was Father Browne's reply?' he inquired indulgently.

'He said, in that case, one should take very good care not to deafen oneself.'

'And what do you imagine, Miss Simcox, he meant

by that?' inquired Mrs. le Mercier, with a roll of her fine eyes.

'Answers are useless', interposed Miss Bolsover, 'that merely confuse things, and especially where principles are at stake.'

'What do *you* think, Cecil?' continued Grummumma, swooping round on her grandson with the *éclat* of a squadron of cavalry. 'You are being remarkably silent this afternoon, even for you. Though no doubt you have discussed the question?'

The green shade shifted uneasily. 'I suppose what Father Browne meant', Cecil faltered, 'is that what one does is not necessarily a proof of what one is. At least one may hope not—always. I suppose motive counts, and that we can never really know one another. What's inside, I mean. The rest may be chiefly advertisement. But it's not much good asking me. I don't indulge in actions.'

'Dear, dear, dear!' cried Grummumma crisply, 'deeper and deeper! I wonder what Canon Bagshot is thinking of such heresies.'

She did not pause, however, to inquire, but at once turned the stream of conversation in the direction of the Shop Acts, and was presently assuring her visitor how much, *much* brighter she must be thankful to realize her lot in life now was, compared with that of the young ladies who worked in drapers' establishments twenty or thirty years ago, when there was no early closing, when no 'assistant' was *ever* out on the streets until after ten o'clock, and on Saturdays—imagine it!—before midnight. 'The evils of such a system! And the living-in conditions!' She lifted her plump hands in horror from her lap. 'They were, I understand, simply too dreadful for description. Anaemia, pernicious and otherwise, was

rampant, I believe. And far worse things than anaemia! The Committee of which my dear father was Chairman was shocked beyond words. But now everything is changed. You are free, Miss Simcox, for a little pleasant gossip, are you not, almost at any hour of the day?'

The dark eyes of her visitor, from under her small black hat, watched every expression of the old handsome face. Except for a slight increase of pallor, her own showed no trace of the fires that were smouldering within. Her wits, too, a little more nimble perhaps than Grummumma supposed them to be, were rapidly accustoming themselves to a method of attack with which they were not wholly unfamiliar. It would be as refreshing as a plunge into a cold bath to let these good people realize her real opinions of them—to give as good as she was getting, and so quietly too that 'moddam' would remember it to her dying day.

Her glance wandered for an instant resolutely from face to face, passed on softly from flaxen Eirene's, then rested on Cecil. He was sitting with folded hands and downcast head as if, poor thing, this was a Home for the Feeble-minded and she herself was an applicant who could not afford the fees. If he had been a blind mute, he could hardly have looked more immobile. The angry flames within languished, went out. She felt suddenly limp and helpless and was just about to prove to Grummumma how swimming a victory was hers, when the groping figure in front of her pushed out his chin and remarked that if what Mrs. le Mercier had said were true, then men must be worse devils than he had thought possible. 'If I had my way,' he burst out passionately, 'I'd burn the whole "Parade" down.'

'Exactly, my dear boy,' retorted Grummumma, 'and be off next morning (if you escaped the Police) to find

another hatter and hairdresser and haberdasher. Oh Cecil, Cecil! Miss Simcox is perfectly well aware, my dear boy, of her employer's difficulties. We have in this world to face things as they are. And civilization is impossible without give and take on all sides.'

'Yes,' cried Cecil ferociously, 'and who does the taking, I should like to know?'

'But surely, dear lad,' urged Canon Bagshot amiably, 'we must not mix up things as they ought to be with things as they are. We must push gently on from one to the other. Progress is step by step, not by violent eruptions.

> Not in vain [*he cleared his throat*], not in vain the distance beacons.
> Forward, forward let us range:
> Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change.

That surely is not only poetry, but all that makes for sobriety and discretion. And are we not missing the whole point of what has been said? It is that the conditions of shop life have been very much *improved*. We are—I agree in only a small respect—*congratulating* ourselves. Is not that so, Miss Simcox?'

Miss Simcox had put down her cup once and for all at last. She glanced a little hesitantly about her. The green shade had lowered itself once more. Not a feature was visible; the delicate hands were clenched tight on the chair. 'Shop life?' she said, 'Oh, yes!' And she looked at Canon Bagshot. 'But then I don't see how people *can* know what other people's lives are really like. And what does it matter? I am perfectly happy as I am.'

'And *that*', said Grummumma, rising with an almost majestic urbanity, 'is the most sensible remark I have heard for many a day. If every class and degree could say that, our difficulties would be at an end. My daughter—

my grandson's mother—Mrs. Mortimer FitzKelly—once had a young nursemaid who. . . .' With the amplest of smiles and the most elastic of gestures she had inserted herself between the two young people, and was already proffering her hand. Eirene had slipped over to the piano, in hasty search apparently of a suddenly remembered promise to perform. Miss Bolsover had already engaged the Canon in talk. The contest was over.

And at this precise moment Cecil dragged himself to his feet, as if to re-enter the lists. But in vain. He blundered forward only to find that Grummumma had exquisitely eluded him, and that their guest was already well on her way out—out of touch, out of hearing, even of hail.

His head twisted aimlessly on his shoulders, like a rusty smoke cowl in a breeze. A cloud swept over his dejected eyes. He turned irresolutely as if for help.

'You poor dear boy,' cried Mrs. le Mercier, as she hastily re-entered the room, 'I am afraid Dr. Lodge has been far too precipitant. You look positively worn-out.'

But Cecil was already pushing his way out of the room. And as with hand upon the banisters he groped his way on from stair to stair, he caught only the last word or two of what Grummumma was saying: 'Just a *soupçon* of *savoir-faire*, poor little thing; and she might be almost presentable.'

It was Eirene who tapped at his door a few minutes later. She turned the handle, but in vain.

'Cecil, dear,' a whisper came, 'it's only me. Are you ill? Is anything the matter?' But since no answer of any kind sounded out of the vacancy beyond, there was nothing for it but to hope for the best.

Miss Simcox's champion can hardly be said to have

appeared in shining armour. For an unconscionable time he sat by his dressing table, his hands clasped between his knees. He was attempting to think, to argue, to explain, to plan, and all this at the same moment. The result was little more serviceable than the rotations of a squirrel in a cage. Nor did the chattering of his teeth afford him any particular help in the crisis.

During the next few days, though never before in his memory had balms so gentle and precious been poured upon his head, Cecil realized that he was a prisoner closely guarded, with a family physician for chief warden. Of his two devotees, he much preferred Grummumma. She at least made no attempt to suggest that she was an ally he had treacherously stabbed in the back.

It was the faint, far-away pathos in Eirene's tones, the gentle insinuation in her manner—'See how forbearing I am!'—that corroded every hour he spent in her company; while always between them lurked the remembrance, never referred to, that he had asked her help, had flung himself on her mercy, and that she had at least not given him away. She had so little given him away, indeed, that every touch of hand and wooing cadence of the grieved voice assured him that she was in fact keeping him entirely for herself. Moreover, what she and Grummumma might have managed unaided was made the more easy by the thermometer and the weather.

There was no doubt Cecil was ill, though the most distressing of his symptoms—the mind that revolved on and on in anguish at his own helplessness—remained concealed. It was a helplessness, none the less, awaiting only the very shadow of an opportunity to break free.

About eleven o'clock on the Tuesday morning after Mrs. le Mercier's unusual visitor had come and gone, the clouds over Cecil's birthplace broke gently and then

cleared completely away. It fell to Eirene to take him, well wrapped up and looking more like a hopeless invalid than ever, on his next constitutional. And Cecil chose for it a route exactly opposite to that which would have led them towards the shops.

'I often wonder', she began speculating, in her lately acquired plaintive tones, 'what you really and truly think of people, Cecil. You always seem to me to have much more definite "views" about them than most men of your age. And they don't seem to be very high ones—the views, I mean. Why's that?'

'You mean', said Cecil, speaking out of the turned-up collar of his overcoat, 'that as I can only see their lower halves, I cannot be any judge of their upper. You don't seem to realize that a person's character is scrawled all over him—over his boots even, rough-hew them as he will.' The reply would have been almost sprightly if it had not sounded so bitter.

'You don't mean surely that cheap shoes and cotton stockings necessarily mean common minds? That would be *too* unfair.'

'I mean', said Cecil stubbornly, 'that what's bred in the soul comes out in the ankle. It's not merely what a person puts *on* his feet, but how he uses them. Besides, aren't there laces and buttons and buckles and so on? Don't we walk? Compare the kindly cow with the gazelle. And my God, Eirene, you don't suppose I can't even see up as far as the breast-bone where the hollow is where the heart should be?'

'I really don't know what's come over you,' said Eirene. 'It doesn't even seem to be yourself talking. You seem to have got so dreadfully clever and *never* to mean what you say. When you are not purposely misunderstanding one, you are—well once you wouldn't

have said "my God", Cecil. And you used not to be *coarse*.'

'No,' said Cecil.

'And I didn't realize until this moment', she pursued, 'that you were an expert in ankles and that kind of thing. You remember how we once agreed that we could always guess in whose company Kitty had been by her manner. She just catches whoever's about,' she added sportively, 'a sort of social mumps or German measles. But I never noticed that in *you* before. Besides', and there was now a genuine hint of anxiety in her voice, 'you don't look a bit better. You talk to me as if you hated me body and soul; as if you almost detested me—physically, I mean. And the whole time I am with you—and Auntie agrees—you appear to be thinking of something else. What is the good of it all? Do you suppose I have never had my own little disillusionments and am not perfectly thankful to have found out that they *were* disillusionments? Nothing I can do or say seems of the least good. Why, if you had even asked my *help*—' the voice really faltered now, and fell silent.

But Cecil, unlike most young men, could not realize how disturbing an experience it can be to be walking in the street with a companion positively shedding tears. He just walked on. He continued meanwhile for a moment or two to explore what Eirene had said.

'I think', he replied at last, faintly but firmly, 'I have had enough of this ridiculous imitation street. And I hate the mock. We'll turn back.'

There was little of the war-horse apparent in him as he wheeled. His mind had none the less suddenly cleared. It was finally made up. And he stepped out before his companion as if they had once and for all arranged the future between them. At the gate—the bland, white face

of Grummumma's house flinging its reflected sunshine in their faces under the low, delicate, pale blue arch of the sky—Eirene paused. 'You mean', she said with a choking voice, 'that you would prefer me to be—*not* to be a friend. Well, so be it, Cecil. I can't help myself. I must just bear it. But you shall find that I *am* in spite of you.'

This pathetic challenge, however, only served to consolidate Cecil's resolution. At three o'clock in the afternoon Grummumma was accustomed to shut herself up in her bedroom for half an hour—to relax. She relaxed inch by inch, and then the complete area. It was Eirene's turn to be sentinel again. She now sat playing very plaintive Mendelssohn in the drawing-room with the door wide open, and most of her attention, if not her actual eye, fixed on the staircase that descended into view beyond it. Cecil had left her there after lunch, and, as she had expected, now sat in his own room, drinking in the winning strains.

At half-past four he sent word by the parlour-maid that he would not be down to tea; and Grummumma having returned from relaxing, the two confederates nibbled their thin bread and butter in secret, and exchanged policies. None the less, as if a bird in the air had carried the note, Cecil with door ajar realized the trend of their hushed talk, though he was honestly beyond the possibility of catching any single word of it. 'What was to happen now?' he was thinking, the eyes in his aching head fixed upon his tea-cup. At half-past five Grummumma went out. Eirene was evidently doing double duty.

At a quarter to seven Mr. Mallow, Canon Bagshot's latest curate, looked in, with a new novel from Mudie's under his arm. This, he assured Eirene so eagerly that he might himself have been its author, was well worth

reading. 'There's so much clap-trap, so much positive slush published nowadays,' he asserted, 'that any piece of fiction with a trace of conviction in it—and I don't mean necessarily moral conviction—just conviction, is something to be thankful for. One must face the facts.'

It was at this moment that Cecil came groping silently down the staircase, as if he were a thief in his own house, breaking not in, but out. Mr. Lindsay was possessed of a resonant voice, a gift that is singularly fortifying when a slim, fair, and possibly slightly feline young woman is sharing its charms. The young man on the other side of the drawing-room wall now had his ungloved fingers on the latch.

'Face the facts?' Eirene was trembling. 'How very interesting, Mr. Lindsay. I should love to read it. There are some novels, you know, that really are rather awful. Still, I *believe*,' she opened her blue eyes wide just to show how much she meant it, 'I believe I almost prefer some of my facts done up in pretty paper. Is that *very* weak of me? *Men* like things so dreadfully bare!'

Cecil was so much engrossed in his private affairs that he did not pause to wonder why Eirene never talked with this particular timbre in her voice in her intercourse with himself. Mr. Lindsay's robuster tones broke out once more. 'You see, dear young lady, nowadays novelists may be said to be divided into three camps. On the one hand we have these deplorable realists who think that by calling a spade a spade they are bound to use, and are justified in using the most deplorable language. On the other we have what I should call the serio-sentimentalists, who try to show life devoid of shadows and who therefore cannot see it whole. And last we have the Shocking School merely out to pull any leg that shows. As for the Feminists—but I am not suggesting, of course. . . .'

But Cecil had by now released the catch of the lock and the heavy door had been softly shut behind him. He was free. And his one desperate desire now was to make that freedom secure. It being Professor Flaxman Smith's parlour-maid's afternoon out, she was given no opportunity to open her bright blue eyes wide with astonishment at the sight of 'that young Mr. Jennings' positively running, even though at best it was but a shambling run. But he was covering the ground.

All the peculiar paraphernalia of his life—cracks in the pavement, little windy orgies of dust and straw and dried dung, that same dust stilled and sodden after the night's rain, hairpins of every shape, metal, size, and degree of elegance, dead leaves, running ants, scraps of paper, sparrows, drowsing cats, questing dogs, area railings, basement bars, cooks, kitchen tables, meat on them, fires in summer—all these phenomena now floated past his downcast eyes unheeded. It was Thursday. It was Early Closing Day. With nothing but a name in his mind, and no address, with only the most meagre of hopes in the old trysting-place, he hastened on, determined that unless somehow or other Grummumma managed to circumvent him, he was going to assure himself of one single thing before he returned home. What exactly that thing was, he did not attempt to put into words. He wanted to say something, but first he must find the human being whom he wanted to say it *to*.

If the rather starchy-looking, blue-spectacled, elderly Cecil Jennings of thirty years later had ventured out on a similar quest, he would have had an extra hour of daylight, of Summer Time, to help him. This particular evening Cecil's allowance of light was by that much the more brief. But the skies were fair, the air was fresh and gentle. And after a narrow escape from being run over

by a brewer's dray, he safely circumnavigated the rectory garden wall, and when he had pushed on along the river path to within a few hundred yards or so of the row of bright green lime trees, immediate risk of recognition was safely over.

The quality of the town were not accustomed to enjoy the river path at so late an hour. Maybe too because the day was Thursday and its usual frequenters were further afield, or maybe because fortune was for that one evening in league with him, very few wayfarers indeed were about. The flowers of the dying grass from the first hay-swathes in the meadow beyond the stream burdened the air with their strange sweetness. Swallows with tiny clash of beak and *skirr* of wing were hawking up and down the placid water; gnats in their dervish dancing drifted softly in every caprice of the breeze.

With little breath left either in body or spirit, Cecil came to a standstill. His mind was like a deflated balloon. The whole brave venture had suddenly become the stupidest goose chase. What preposterous self-confidence had brought him here? What justification, for that matter, had he for being a mere makeweight in the world at all? The burning heart had suddenly become like lead within him. An ailing half-wit dazzled by a shop-girl—the miserable folly of it all! The very beauty of the scene was a mockery and a sneer.

And now that the little sacred wooden bench would soon come within hail, every vestige of confidence forsook him. He felt as helpless and forlorn as a butterfly perishing in the vain attempt to extricate itself from its chrysalis skin. In the innocent hope of disguise, he had crammed on to his head an old soft hat discarded at least five years before. Nor were his clothes of his latest punctilious cut. It was no use. The whole attempt was fatu-

ous. Nothing he could ever do would carry him further than half way. He might as well return to the High Street and apply at the Town Hall for a list of drapers and landladies and knock them up one by one. After the deliberate insult of that tea party, even if he were successful, would she so much as consent to speak to him again? He buttoned his coat, shifted his eye-shade a little from the fretting line it had in his haste bitten into his forehead, and plodded on.

The lime tree was already disclosing the buds of its green-gold dangling racemes that would in a day or two be filling the air with a liquid sweetness as delicious as that of the withering grass. Here and there circlets of ripples showed where rising fish had rent the silken surface of the water. The river flowed on under the evening skies without haste between its banks. Summer comes, and goes. How was it possible that, only a few days before, this lovely, gentle, melancholy retreat had shown him a glimpse of Paradise, a paradise ablaze with lightning and shaken with thunder. The very bench, its timber still dark with a shower that had fallen, was eloquent with deprecation.

It was anguish to linger here, useless to venture further, futile to go back. He must just give the problem up, that was all. And all this concern, this fatuity, interjected a sardonic voice (and one not entirely unlike Grummumma's), from somewhere within his mind—all this for the sake of a green-sick shop-assistant! A young woman ineligible even for the parochial Guild. A horrid Jesuitical Cartholic! A Cartholic, too, who for curiously conscientious reasons had only just escaped becoming the wife of one of the young puritans of the 'Parade'. He listened with absolute calm to this harangue, as he stood leaning against the trunk of the tree. 'But it doesn't

matter, my dear,' he muttered, as if in hope his whisper might penetrate to the ear of the secret Dryad slumbering beneath its smooth, dark rind. 'Nothing in the world would matter if only you would come!'

Humanity for the most part is so confident in the skill of its senses that it seldom realizes how severe are their limitations. Not to be able to divine where the long-sought-for lost thing lies concealed in one's own small earthly house; not to be able to see through even a sheet of paper; not to be aware that one's nearest and dearest at but a hundred paces' distance is in deadly danger; not to hear the faintest echo of the burning or icy thoughts in a close companion's mind—such is man's queer fate in his inexhaustibly rich environment. And yet poor Cecil never regretted the agony of the next few minutes of irresolution and despair, even though, as he was to discover when they were over, it was only a universal insensitiveness that was keeping him unaware.

Unaware, that is, that not twenty yards distant, and seated on the damp grass on the shelving bank of the river, her hands clasping her knees, was the young woman he longed for, her head turned towards him at an acute angle, her dark, quick eyes drinking him in. It seemed that she had made up her mind to give him time, and to give him his own time. Without otherwise stirring, she turned her head away again, and once more steadily surveyed the flowing water.

The narrow cheek bones under the low brow and the straight black eyebrows were as pale as ivory in the reflected light of an almost colourless sunset. It was in part the usual pallor of shop life and in part the result of poor food and indifferent sleep. But then ivory itself does not take to itself this particular bloom until the animal

that grew it has gone into the dark. Peace itself to be sitting here now after the awful conflict, inward and outward, of the last few days. Other battles had left ugly indelible scars, and yet she had come through—what was left of her. The long agonized inward conflict of the last few days was over. All was lost. And yet the world had never looked so lovely, so hard to abandon, nor had she herself ever been so utterly at rest. She had never much cared what became of her, not at least until that absurd morning when her missing glove had been all but restored. And now, after a black, exhausting night, when dreams in the shallow sleep that had at last closed in upon her mind at the first cheeping of the sparrows had only increased her torments by a conviction of hopeless inefficiency, she knew exactly *what* was to become of her. But she had never for an instant foreseen that in the mean time she would meet again the one human being who had been the final cause of her decision.

Already in the waning light her face appeared a little duskier, its grave scrutiny fixed on that profoundly lustrous and fluid looking-glass. She speculated how deep it actually was; smiled inwardly at the thought of how shallow it need be. She gazed across the sliding water and watched a moment with a curious spiritual greed in her eyes the haze-swathed fields with their fringe of solemn and gigantic elms. Her nostrils quivered as if with a suppressed sigh or shudder as she breathed in the honey of the first few linden flowers. It was a mysterious thing to be alive, or rather, not so much to be alive as to be one's only means of sharing all this. When she was gone it would be all gone too—except, of course, what might come after. And she hadn't much time to think very closely about that.

Still, she was quite accustomed to finding pinned on

with a midget pin to the corner of every scrap even of machine-made lace or the flimsiest of handkerchiefs that she proffered across the counter its precise price to the uttermost farthing. So she was unlikely to fail to realize that not only whatever happens in this world, but whatever one is responsible for in it, and buys or sells of oneself, has had affixed to it its own price also. And that, too, to the uttermost farthing. And yet it was a luxury to feel her hands clasped round her bony shins and to be huddling like this with her limbs and body close together in this quiet, rain-soaked grass that would certainly teach her all in good time not to be so imprudent. An overwhelming remorse for the fate of her own body suddenly swept over her. It would be a pity to waste it.

And then, very cautiously, stealthily almost, as if even the soundless grinding of one sinew of the neck against another might be audible in this intense hush of evening, she turned her head once more and surveyed the stiff, awkward-looking shape now humped up so inanimately on its wooden bench under the tree. It would be silly, as well as unkind, perhaps, to keep him there any longer. She gave a little sort of nod at the water, much the same sort of little nod that she was accustomed to give when she had jotted down the total of a customer's bill on the piece of cardboard at the end of her shop-book. Then she rose, stole up the bank, and went over to where Cecil was sitting.

'Good evening,' she said close to him. 'Here's a bad penny, you see.'

His whole body turned round in her direction. He thrust out his hands as if to ward off an unexpected enemy. But she made no move to reassure him.

'I didn't know you were there,' he said. 'Is there anybody else near?'

She laughed softly. 'So you have discovered at last, then, that I am not the kind of person to be seen with.'

He rose to his feet and stood perfectly still, his hands trembling a little in spite of himself.

'I could say things like that too,' he replied, 'but I should hate myself for doing so.'

'Which might be', she retorted, 'the beginning of a perfectly horrid quarrel. But I didn't mean anything at all. I just said it. One must say something. I learned that the other day.'

'This is all so horribly open,' said the young man, sweeping his cane round with an incredibly magnificent gesture as if in proof of it. He might be Satan himself, surveying from his mountain-top the outstretched Kingdoms of the World. 'Could we go on a little farther, do you think?'

'Farther!' she answered. 'To Land's End, if you like —if we could. But I've got to be out of the streets by ten, or say eleven, or I shall be on them for good on Monday.'

'I never knew any one', said Cecil, 'who had such a dreadful way of telling the truth. You must be very young for that.'

An inexhaustible serenity seemed to have descended upon him. It seemed that he hadn't an enemy in the world, that before them lay an infinity of space fenced in only by an infinity of time. 'If you only knew what I feel at being with you again,' he muttered. 'I have been waiting for you for ages. But had—had given you up. I have been kept in again you see—idiot that I am.'

'Well,' she said in a curiously flattened voice, which yet seemed to conceal an intensity of music, 'never mind that! Here I am. I don't mind, I don't mind even if you have been at death's door, as long as you too are with *me*

again. You see, I am always more or less contented when I haven't any decisions to make. I am sick of them but there are none left now.'

She smiled to herself as fondly as a beauty at the image in her glass. 'I didn't suppose I should see you again, and yet even impossibilities come true sometimes.' She turned her head away and went on with an effort: 'You see, I couldn't pretend I'm sorry to see you. I ought to. But nothing now, nobody in the world—or out of it either—could make me say that.' Once more she twisted about. 'Is *that* a common and horrible way of telling the truth? Like losing a whole boxful of gloves, I suppose.'

'You never say anything,' he replied gently, conscious, it seemed, while they loitered slowly on, of every saw-edged, exquisite blade of grass stooping green under the evening sky and here and there laden with a drop, a crystal universe, of rain-water—'you never say anything without saying something different immediately after. I don't see, I mean, why you should always give a sting to everything. Mayn't we be—just friends, for now? You see,' he hastened on, 'I want to speak to you very badly indeed. I have got to make plans. And I am wondering if you would help me.'

'Where did you leave Mrs. le Mercier', she inquired, 'and—and that other young lady? I enjoyed that tea party. But I had, of course, *heard* of Canon Bagshot before—often. He's a little like a vulture, isn't he?'

'I have left them at home,' he answered amiably, 'or rather, Grummumma will be at home by now.'

'Will they be sending a rescue party do you think—from the street girl?'

'Oh,' he said helplessly, 'you will just break me in pieces if you go on talking like that. You don't know

what I have been through these last few days—knowing what you must have thought of me. I deserve it all.'

For the moment Miss Simcox made no reply. Her inward glance had vaguely returned with a wry little grimace to scan the vista of her own last few days; but she was not going to say anything about that. Instead, and as usual for no clear reason, a flush of colour slowly spread over her pale face. She could feel the heat of it as she blurted out, 'Then you've missed me? *Missed* me—missed *me*?' With a wrench she regained her self-control. 'Well, then, all I can say is, that I've missed you too. I mean, if you are kind enough to talk to me, I *like* talking to you. In the whole of my life I have never talked to any one like you. I mean that *I* have never really talked before to *any* one, and that I have never talked to any one like *you*. Do you see *now* what I mean?'

'I hear what you say,' said Cecil in despair. It was odd that anything so substantial as the ground upon which they were walking should seem to be at least as precarious yet as buoyant as the water of which it was the restraining buttress. 'I can't think what you can find in me,' he added lamely.

'And me?'

'I don't find anything. I *am* you. You are *here*.' As if even the sweet, pure air of a summer evening might be a little suffocating in certain conditions, his companion had lightly touched her throat with outspread fingers. 'Do you,' he went on hastily, 'do you understand what I mean?'

He came to a standstill, gesticulating with his hand as if over a mathematical problem. 'The moment you come, my mind is like another place. I have never seen anything of this before—this green, this loveliness, that water. I don't even know what they are; they have gone back to their own secrets, as, do you remember—when

you were a child? . . .' Her only answer to that was a vigorous, tragic little nod he couldn't see.

'Don't let us say any more about that,' she went on with a shudder. 'There are worse things than *not* seeing. . . . I wonder if, do you think, just for this once I might take your arm? I assure you there is not a soul in sight now. There was a blackbird calling on the other side of the river a moment ago, and just now I saw a bat in the air. Up there is the first star. Do you understand what *I* am saying? All it means is that I have gone to heaven—to heaven! before I die.'

She had slipped her ungloved fingers through his arm, and the pair of them paced on towards—though they did not know it—towards the sea, and not towards the source of the river. They looked just like what they were—two commonplace sweethearts aimlessly wandering on together. And a sentimental passer-by might have thought how pleasant it was that a young man so severely handicapped should yet have been able to find a future helpmate.

But then this kind of foolish self-sacrifice is expected of the gentler sex, though as a matter of fact there was an odd suggestion of the masculine in the way in which this silk-shaded young man's companion walked along beside him. There was a hint almost of the athlete in her every movement this evening, which is only to say, after all, that even in the indifferently nourished bodies which civilization is so freely responsible for, some spring of the wild animal may still remain.

The two young people went on in an eternity that was a moment until they had reached a point where a few silver birches and hazels thinly screened them from the world they had for that moment left behind them. There the young woman came suddenly to a standstill.

'I must go back in a minute,' she said. 'And if you don't mind, I would prefer to go back alone. Meanwhile we are here, and even a little time is a long time when there's not much left.' She laughed softly.

Irked by the obstacle of the rooty bank at this bend, the water gurgled as if in echo of a never-ending lullaby. At least to some ears it might sound so, though for Cecil it resembled the monologue of a hopeless voice babbling of everlasting darkness. 'You have only just come,' he said, 'and now you talk about saying good-bye.'

'I didn't wish to. I must.'

'Well, then,' he said, 'all I am going to say to you is this; and would you please listen as patiently as you can? Without interrupting me, I mean. It's—it's nothing much.' He waved his fingers in the air, took a deep breath, and plunged on. 'What I mean is this: I haven't very much money now, but I have some. A little income, you know, only four or five hundred a year—but certain. It's horribly little to go on with, but even Grummumma can't keep me out of a good deal more than *that* in a few years' time. Can't. Apart from that, and I don't mind saying it a bit, she can't live for ever. I don't want her even to live as long as that. Honestly I don't. I wouldn't so much mind if she had driven me—just harassed me, you know. It would have done me good. But she's held so tight to the bit, that my mouth's all covered with blood. I know now what's gone on all along. It's her way, her self, her domination. *That's* what Scarlet Women are made of. I see it now even though they—well, that's what I *mean*. And I simply can't stand it any longer. Possibly I should have stood it—at least for some little time—if *you* hadn't come. If *you* hadn't come, I believe I should have gone mouldering on like a suet pudding in a damp pantry. Oh yes, I know what I am talking about

all right! I saw a slice of that once—mildewed—on my own plate, when my nurse didn't think my eyes could see under the bandage.'

Cecil breathed again. He paused. Then, 'What I am saying is this,' he went on tranquilly, 'would you mind telling me how we can get married? I mean what do they do? I don't mean the Canon Bagshot way. I know that's impossible. But isn't there some place where you can get married just for the time being, without, I mean, going to a church? And especially, if you are a Roman Catholic. Couldn't we go to a church later on, don't you think, when we have got safely away? I want to get married to you *at once* if we can—if I may. And yet I don't think I have even told you I love you. I don't think there was any reason to say that. You must have thought me even a more unutterable idiot than you must think me if you think that. I don't want to be impatient. I mean, I don't want to vex you into saying, No—that is, if you *won't* marry me. You see, I am so dreadfully ignorant of all these things. But you said just now that if you weren't back in your home by eleven it would be the streets on Monday. What did you mean by that, please?'

It was ludicrous what a muddle the young man was in; and yet how easy his listener was finding it to sort him all out and to see exactly not only where the commas and semicolons ought to have come in this remarkable piece of oratory, but also the full stop, the 'period', as she had been taught to call it when she was (for a year or two) at school. That was before the drapery business set in. That was before her father went off with the other woman. That was before even the none-too-particular but good-humoured woman next door began to take care of her for a time and to learn her in certain ways how it is

possible when the worst comes to the worst, to take care of oneself. But all this was quite a long, long, long time before she had met this young man with the green shade over his eyes.

There was the look almost of a half-witted creature on her face as she now stood staring at the water. And yet, like a singularly intelligent canary or like a singularly instinctive blackcap or mocking bird, she was trying over—as rapidly as a Paganini might a phrase in Mozart—she was trying over half a dozen tunes in which to reply. She chose the hardest.

'When I was engaged—and never mind who—' she said, 'we found out about getting married without a parson. He knew all about all that. You go to what is called a Registry Office. We thought—we might have to. Do you see? It would, of course, have been everlasting damnation to me, if we had; or at any rate a good many centuries of Purgatory. And to you—why! Oh, don't I *know* it!—it would be the dismalest and most horrible thing you ever conceived of doing in the whole of your life. No, no, I can't marry you. I don't wish to. Oh, no. Don't let us waste this little time in talking of foolish things like that. I couldn't marry you. I couldn't. I don't wish to. Not go down like that, after all you have been, and said. I don't even mind confessing now—as you see!—that I thought all this out even after the first time we met on the Parade. It was vile of me, I know, but it's my character. I always see ahead. From the very first instant. When you are in my—well, some girls wait for marriage, just for the chance. They even. . . But never mind; that's all over now. Until you came I never had a friend—not a *friend*. Did you really think I would ever risk—when you knew everything—losing. . . Oh, you don't seem to realize', she suddenly turned on him,

'how hopelessly, blindly unpractical and unworldly you are. You say you are a fool: well, you *are*. A fool in all that *I*'m *not*. I have been soaked in the other thing ever since I was born. If you asked me to go to the devil with you, I'd go—gladly. But you wouldn't. And knowing that, I'd rather go alone. And yet, before God, I love you. I say, I love you. It breaks my heart to say it. I didn't know it was possible. I didn't know what it meant. And yet, though you won't, though you can't understand about the rest of me. . . But don't listen to that. What's the use if I never could and never, never would say, yes. Just listen only to what I am saying now. I love you. It's spelt l-o-v-e.' She gazed at the half-hidden face with an agonized smile. 'And simply because of that, it must be—we must leave each other here. It's almost night now. Don't let us talk any more. But you *must* be able to see I couldn't go back with you now. My legs wouldn't bear me. And honestly I don't think I could manage to *say* good-bye. So would you'—a fantastic, almost jocular note had edged into her curious voice—a voice like that of a delicate instrument whose sound-box has somehow or other become cracked, muting the clearer timbre of the thing, 'so would you please kiss me, and I'll be gone.'

Cecil groped for the hand that hung limp and inert beside the old serge skirt. He lifted it, and looked at its fingers. He counted them. They were long and narrow-boned fingers, and belonging, as they did, not to her right hand, they were a little less marked with work.

'I don't want to tell you,' he muttered as if to himself at last, and still examining them in the clarifying focus afforded by his shade,'I don't want to tell you how shockingly miserable you are making me. You think I am a coward. You don't believe I could ever do anything, ever

break free. You say you love me—you *say* you do—but you don't believe in me, not at all. I might just as well be a child for all that you are saying. But then I know it can't mean anything. I mean, I know you couldn't help saying it, and I can't tell you what I think of you for *having* said it. But you see, what I feel is that if you are going to keep to what you say—even if after all you weren't utterly meaning it—then I *must* see your face. I couldn't kiss you until I had, and it may be more than I can bear, more than I can manage, I mean. There isn't any moon, either,' he added helplessly. 'Would you mind taking tight hold of both my hands?'

She flung her arms away from him, took a quick step backwards, stooping low, like a dangerous animal about to spring. 'Do you mean you are going to try *that* horrible thing—now?' she cried at him. 'Be quiet, do. You don't know what you are saying. Be quiet, do. Here I am. All you can see. What *more* has anybody wanted. Oh, you won't be content till you've skinned me to the very bone. Look at *me*! Oh, you will hurt yourself. You said you might die. And,' her voice ran down the scale until she was scarcely more than whispering, 'and how, pray, do you know what I look *like*? *I* do. You should see the looking-glass my landlady gives me. *That's* where I powder my nose!' A corrosive sardonicism had come into her voice. A look of fierce vindictiveness distorted her narrow face and her blazing disquieted eyes. 'Oh, for God's sake', she said, 'do try and be a little kind to me. There won't be very much time for it, if you only knew.'

But Cecil had followed her up, and she could retreat no further unless she was to plunge at once into the swirling water a foot or two beneath the bank. He was lifting his chin with convulsive efforts and had thrust

both hands on her shrinking shoulders as he did so. And at last, with a strangled sob, he found himself gazing eye to eye with this phantom of his dreams.

Strangely enough, he *had* been without the least expectation of what that face looked like. It hadn't seemed to matter. And now that he was scrutinizing it, only half conscious of the appalling pangs which were darting from skull to spine, it was not as if he had merely recognized her, but as if this were the first face that as a mortal creature he had ever seen at all—a landscape, a garden, a marvel, before time, lovely, earthly, yet unbelievable, all-pitying, burnt up with pain, never to be forgotten, never to be exhausted, never to be understood.

And before he could make the slightest movement, she had taken him in her arms and had hidden his anguished and distorted and transfigured face on her breast. 'Oh,' she cried. 'How could you do it! How dared you! Oh, dear, my dear! Oh, my dear, my dear, my dear! Have a moment's peace. Don't you see it will be mine too?'

Cecil had lost ages ago all but the faintest remembrances of his childhood; or rather, he had never let himself think about it. And now he had reached a momentary, yet eternal oblivion, though it was an oblivion fenced in by misery and pain.

'Listen,' he said drawing back at last, still clutching at her hands, 'I know now what you meant just then; I know what you meant. You meant you had made up your mind to kill yourself to-night—to drown yourself *there*. Well, then, listen to me. You don't move an inch until you have sworn to me by the Holy Ghost you won't do it. Do you understand? I can't keep you, I know that. I only ask you to go away and to think it over, and to come back again here in the morning. I shall be here.

But before you go, even if it's for ever—and surely you couldn't, you wouldn't treat me like that!—you will promise me not to do *that*. Not to be so hopelessly wicked, you understand. You simply couldn't do it, leaving me the burden.'

The fingers in his grip seemed to consist of little else than thin bones. 'There!' she cried into Space, 'isn't that the Man all over! You don't know what you are condemning me to, you cruel boy. You don't *know*. If I told you', she went on rapidly, 'that to stay here—to stay on this earth as I am—will be only to go from one thing on to another, pillar to post until. . . . Do you suppose yours is the only tender-hearted Grandmamma in the world? Oh, if you knew how I long, and now of all times, to get away. And I believe even God would forgive me, if He has any longing left. Ah, well, you *don't* know. And what's the good of talking!'

'But you promise?' Cecil repeated. 'For after all, you are not thinking of me. You haven't remembered what my life has been like—silly fop that I am.'

'My dear,' she sobbed brokenly, 'your hands are all wet. I can't really see your face, but you are shuddering all over. I will take you home after all. We can walk well apart. . . . But no—no!'

'But you promise?' he repeated.

Her eyes strayed from the hideous pent-house shade to the dark, secret water.

'No,' she said, 'I cannot promise. . . But there!—God helping me—I won't.'

Nothing seemed to matter now. She knew all that she was. Every thought in her head seemed to have foundered in an unfathomable pit of darkness. 'But you don't know what you are asking,' she added again, with a sound that might almost have been taken for laughter.

'You are asking me to go on loving you, and that I don't see how I shall be able to bear.'

She drew her hands gently away and stood for a moment quietly looking at her solitary companion, as if uncertain whether or not she had ever seen him before. But in a while the illusion cleared away and she realized where she was; the darkened wood, the secret gurgling water, the empty starry sky.

'Listen,' she said at last, stooping forward, her shoulders seeming to fold themselves a little together like the curve of a bird's wings. 'Are you safe now?'

He nodded.

'Not in pain?' He shook his head in his agony.

'And you won't quite forget me?' He made no answer.

'Well, then,' she went on earnestly, like a child repeating its catechism, 'never forget that I came to the *end* of my life when you came to its beginning. I didn't know what it meant to love anybody. And I'd rather have gone. For you see, when you looked up at me, something came *here*—I can't explain. I. . . .'

Nor did she ever come back to explain. The sun was riding high in the heavens next morning, and the scene around Cecil alive with its scintillating summer beauty—skylarks in the empty blue, butterflies wavering from flower to flower, the bosoming waters radiant with light—when, too much worn out with pain and hopelessness to pay any attention to such elusive and illusory promises, he realized at last that she was gone never to return, and he groped his way back to Grummumma and his life.

THE GREEN ROOM

Only Mr. Elliott's choicer customers were in his own due season let into his little secret—namely, that at the far end of his shop—beyond, that is, the little table on which he kept his account books, his penny bottle of ink and his rusty pen, there was an annexe. He first allowed his victims to ripen; and preferred even to see their names installed in the pages of his fat dumpy ledger before he decided that they were really worthy of this little privilege.

Alan, at any rate, though a young man of ample leisure and moderate means, had been browsing and pottering about on and off in the shop for weeks before he even so much as suspected there *was* a hidden door. He must, in his innocence, have spent pounds and pounds on volumes selected from the vulgar shelves before his own initiation.

This was on a morning in March. Mr. Elliott was tying up a parcel for him. Having no scissors handy he was burning off the ends of the string with a lighted match. And as if its small flame had snapped at the same moment both the string and the last strands of formality between them, he glanced up almost roguishly at the

young man through his large round spectacles with the remark, 'P'raps, sir, you would like to take a look at the books in the parlour?' And a birdlike jerk of his round bald head indicated where the parlour was to be found.

Alan had merely looked at him for a moment or two out of his blue eyes with his usual pensive vacancy. 'I didn't know there *was* another room,' he said at last. 'But then, I suppose it wouldn't have occurred to me to think there might be. I fancied these books were all the books you had.' He glanced over the dingy hugger-mugger of second-hand literature that filled the shelves and littered the floor—a mass that would have twenty-fold justified the satiety of a Solomon.

'Oh, dear me, no, sir,' said Mr. Elliott, with the pleasantest confidentiality. 'All this is chiefly riff-raff. But I don't mention it except to those gentlemen who are old clients, in a manner of speaking. What's in there is all in the printed catalogue and I can always get what's asked for. Apart from that, there's some who—well, at any rate, I *don't*, sir. But if by any chance you should care to take a look round at any time, you would, I'm sure, be very welcome. This is an oldish house, as you may have noticed, sir, and out there is the oldest parts of it. We call it the parlour—Mrs. Elliott and me; we got it from the parties that were here before we came. Take a look now, sir, if you please, it's a nice little place.'

Mr. Elliott drew aside. Books—and particularly old books, tend to be dusty company. This may account for the fact that few antiquarian booksellers are of Falstaffian proportions. They are more usually lean, ruminative, dryish spectators of life. The gnawing of the worm in the tome is among the more melancholy of nature's lullabies; and the fluctuations in price of 'firsts' and of 'mint

states' must incline any temperament if not towards cynicism, at least towards the philosophical. Herodotus tells of a race of pygmies whose only diet was the odour of roses; and though morocco leather is sweeter than roses, it is even less fattening.

Mr. Elliott, however, flourished on it. He was a rotund little man with a silver watch-chain from which a gold locket dangled, and he had uncommonly small feet. He might have been a ballet-master. 'You make your way up those four stairs, sir,' he went on, as he ushered his customer beneath the curtain, 'turn left down the passage, and the door's on the right. It's quiet in there, but that's no harm done. No hurry, sir.'

So Alan proceeded on his way. The drugget on the passage floor showed little trace of wear. The low panelled walls had been whitewashed. He came at last to the flowered china handle of the door beyond the turn of the passage, then stood for a moment lost in surprise. But it was the trim cobbled garden beyond the square window on his right that took his glance rather than the room itself. Yellow crocuses, laden with saffron pollen, stood wide agape in the black mould, and the greening buds of a bush of lilac were tapping softly against the glass. And above was a sky of the gentlest silken blue; wonderfully still.

He turned and looked about him. The paint on wainscot and cornice must once have been of a bright apple green. It had faded now. A gate-leg table was in the far corner beyond the small-paned window; and on his left, with three shallow steps up to it, was another door. And the shelves were lined from floor to ceiling with the literary treasures which Mr. Elliott kept solely for his elect. So quiet was the room that even the flitting of a

clothes-moth might be audible, though the brightness of noonday now filled it to the brim. For the three poplars beyond the lilac bush were still almost as bare as the frosts of winter had made them.

In spite of the flooding March light, in spite of this demure sprightliness after the gloom and disorder of the shop he had left behind him, Alan—as in his languid fashion he turned his head from side to side—became conscious first and foremost of the *age* of Mr. Elliott's pretty parlour. The paint was only a sort of 'Let's pretend'. The space between its walls seemed, indeed, to be as much a reservoir of time as of light. The panelled ceiling, for example, was cracked and slightly discoloured; so were the green shutter-cases to the windows; while the small and beautiful chimney-piece—its carved marble lintel depicting a Cupid with pan pipes dancing before a smiling goddess under a weeping willow—enshrined a grate that at this moment contained nothing, not even the ashes of a burnt-out fire. Its bars were rusty, and there were signs of damp in the moulded plaster above it.

A gentle breeze was now brisking the tops of the poplar trees, but no murmur of it reached Alan where he stood. With his parcel tucked under his arm, he edged round softly from shelf to shelf and even after so cursory an examination as this—and it was one of Mr. Elliott's principles to mark all his books in plain figures—he realized that his means were much too moderate for his appetite. He came to a standstill, a little at a loss. What was he to do next? He stifled a yawn. Then, abstracting a charming copy of *Hesperides*, by that 'Human and divine' poet, Robert Herrick, he seated himself idly on the edge of the table and began to turn over its leaves. They soon became vocal:

Aske me, why I do not sing
To the tension of the string,
As I did, not long ago,
When my numbers full did flow?
Griefe (ay me!) hath struck my Lute,
And my tongue—at one time—mute.

His eye strayed on, and he read slowly—muttering the words to himself as he did so—'*The departure of the good* Dæmon':

What can I do in Poetry,
Now the good Spirit's gone from me?
Why nothing now, but lonely sit,
And over-read what I have writ.

Alan's indolence was even more extreme; he was at this moment merely over-reading what he had *read*—and what he had read again and again and again. For the eye may be obedient while the master of the mind sits distrait and aloof. His wits had gone wool-gathering. He paused, then made yet another attempt to fix his attention on the sense of this simple quatrain. But in vain. For in a moment or two his light clear eyes had once more withdrawn themselves from the printed page and were once more, but now more intently, exploring the small green room in which he sat.

And as he did so—though nothing of the bright external scene around him showed any change—out of some day-dream, it seemed, of which until then he had been unaware, there had appeared to him from the world of fantasy the image of a face.

No known or remembered face—a phantom face, as alien and inscrutable as are the apparitions that occasionally visit the mind in sleep. This in itself was not a very unusual experience. Alan was a young man of an imaginative temperament, and possessed that inward eye

which is often, though not unfailingly, the bliss of solitude. And yet there was a difference. This homeless image was at once so real in effect, so clear, and yet so unexpected. Even the faint shadowy colours of the features were discernible—the eyes dark and profound, the hair drawn back over the rather narrow temples of the oval head; a longish, quiet, intent face, veiled with reverie and a sort of vigilant sorrowfulness, and yet possessing little of what at first sight might be called beauty—or what at least is usually accepted as beauty.

So many and fleeting, of course, are the pictures that float into consciousness at the decoy of a certain kind of poetry that one hardly heeds them as they pass and fade. But this, surely, was no after-image of one of Herrick's earthly yet ethereal Electras or Antheas or Dianemes, vanishing like the rainbows in a fountain's falling waters. There are degrees of realization. And, whatever 'good Spirit' this shadowy visitant may have represented, and whatever its origin, it had struck *some* 'observer' in Alan's mind mute indeed, and had left him curiously disquieted. It was as if in full sight of a small fishing smack peacefully becalmed beneath the noonday blue, the spars and hulk of some such phantom as the *Flying Dutchman* had suddenly appeared upon the smooth sea green; though this perhaps was hardly a flattering account of it. Anyhow, it had come, and now it was gone—except out of memory—as similar images do come and go.

Mere figment of a day-dream, then, though this vision must have been, Alan found himself vacantly searching the room as if for positive corroboration of it, or at least for some kind of evidence that would explain it away. Faces are but faces of course, whether real or imaginary, and whether they appear in the daytime or the dark, but there is at times a dweller behind the eye that looks out,

though only now and again, from that small window. And *this* looker-out—unlike most—seemed to be innocent of any attempt at concealment. 'Here am I... And you?' *That* had seemed to be the mute question it was asking; though with no appearance of needing an answer; and, well, Alan distrusted feminine influences. He had once or twice in his brief career loved not wisely but too idealistically, and for the time being he much preferred first editions. Besides, he disliked mixing things up—and how annoying to be first slightly elated and then chilled by a mere fancy!

The sun in his diurnal round was now casting a direct beam of light from between the poplars through one of the little panes of glass in Mr. Elliott's parlour. It limned a clear-cut shadow-pattern on the fading paint of the frame and on the floor beneath. Alan watched it and was at the same time listening—as if positively in hope of detecting that shadow's indetectible motion!

In the spell of this reverie, time seemed to have become of an almost material density. The past hung like cobwebs in the air. He turned his head abruptly; he was beginning to feel a little uneasy. And his eyes now fixed themselves on the narrow panelled door above the three stairs on the other side of the room. When consciousness is thus unusually alert it is more easily deceived by fancies. And yet so profound was the quiet around him it seemed improbable that the faint sound he had heard as of silk very lightly brushing against some material obstacle was imaginary. Was there a listener behind that door? Or was there not? If so, it must be one as intent as himself, but far more secret.

For a full minute, and as steadily as a cat crouching over a mouse's hole—though there wasn't the least trace of the predatory on his mild fair features, he scrutinized

the key in the lock. He breathed again; and then with finger in book to keep his place tiptoed across the room and gently—by a mere finger's breadth—opened the door. Another moment and he had pushed it wider. Nothing there. Exactly as he had expected, of course. And yet—why at the same moment was he both disappointed and relieved?

He had exposed a narrow staircase—unstained, uncarpeted. Less than a dozen steep steps up was another door—a shut door, with yet another pretty flowered china handle and china finger-plates to it. A rather unusual staircase, too, he realized, since, unless one or other of its two doors were open, it must continually be in darkness. But you never know what oddity is going to present itself next in an old rambling house. How many human beings, he speculated, as he scanned this steep and narrow vacancy, must in the two or three centuries gone by have ascended and descended that narrow ladder—as abrupt as that of Jacob's dream. They had come, disguised in the changing fashions of their time; they had gone, leaving apparently not a wrack behind.

Well, that was that. This March morning might be speciously bright and sunny but in spite of its sunshine it was cold. Books, too, may cheer the mind, but even when used as fuel they are apt to fail to warm the body, and rust on an empty grate diminishes any illusion of heat its bars might otherwise convey. Alan sighed, suddenly aware that something which had promised to be at least an arresting little experience had failed him. The phantasmal face so vividly seen, and even watched for a moment, had already become a little blurred in memory. And now there was a good deal more disappointment in his mind than relief. He felt like someone who has been cheated at a game he never intended to play. A particu-

larly inappropriate simile, none the less, for he hadn't the smallest notion what the stakes had been, or, for that matter, what the game. He took up his hat and walking-stick, and still almost on tip-toe, and after quietly but firmly shutting both doors behind him, went back into the shop.

'I think I will take *this*, please,' he said almost apologetically to the old bookseller, who with his hands under his black coat-tails was now surveying the busy world from his own doorstep.

'Certainly, sir.' Mr. Elliott wheeled about and accepted the volume with that sprightly turn of his podgy wrist with which he always welcomed a book that was about to leave him for ever. 'Ah, the *Hesperides*, sir. I'll put the three into one parcel. A nice tall clean copy, I see. It came, if memory serves me right, from the library of Colonel Anstey, sir, who purchased the Talbot letters—and at a very reasonable price too. Now if I had a *first* in this condition! . . .'

Alan dutifully smiled. 'I found it in the parlour,' he said. 'What a charming little room—and garden too; I had no idea the house was so old. Who lived in it before you did? I suppose it wasn't always a bookshop?'

He tried in vain to speak naturally and not as if he had plums in his mouth.

'Lived here before me, now?' the bookseller repeated ruminatively. 'Well, sir, there was first of course my immediate predecessor. *He* came before me; and *we* took over his stock. Something of a disappointment too when I came to go through with it.'

'And before *him*?' Alan persisted.

'Before him, sir? I fancy this was what might be called a *private* house. You could see if you looked round a bit how it has been converted. It was a doctor's, I under-

stand—a Dr. Marchmont's. And what we call the parlour, sir, from which you have just emerged, was always, I take it, a sort of book room. Leastways some of the books there now were there then—with the book-plate and all. You see, the Mr. Brown who came before me and who, as I say, converted the house, *he* bought the doctor's library. Not merely medical and professional works neither. There was some choice stuff besides; and a few moderate specimens of what is known in the trade as the curious, sir. Not that I go out of my way for it, myself.'

Alan paused in the doorway, parcel in hand.

'A bachelor, I suppose?'

'The doctor, sir, or Mr. Brown?'

'The doctor.'

'Well now, that I couldn't rightly say,' replied Mr. Elliott cheerfully. 'Let us hope *not*. They tell me, sir, it makes things seem more homely-like to have a female about the house. And', he raised his voice a little, 'I'll warrant that Mrs. Elliott, sir, if she were here to say so would bear me out.'

Mrs. Elliott in fact, a pasty-looking old woman, with a mouth like a cod's and with a large marketing basket on her arm, was at this moment issuing out from behind a curtained doorway. Possibly her husband had caught a glimpse of her reflection in his spectacles. She came on with a beetle-like deliberation.

'What's that you were saying about me, Mr. Elliott?' she said.

'This gentleman was enquiring, my love, if Dr. Marchmont-as-was lived in a state of single blessedness or if there was a lady in the case.'

Mrs. Elliott fixed a slow flat look on her husband, and then on Alan.

'There was a sister or niece or something, so they say. But I never knew anything about them, and don't want to,' she declared. And Alan, a little chilled by her demeanour, left the shop.

Not that that one fishlike glance of Mrs. Elliott's censorious eye had by any means freed his fancy of what had passed. In the days that followed he could never for an instant be sure when or where the face that reverie had somehow conjured up out of the recesses of his mind on his first visit to the old bookseller's parlour was not about to reappear. And it chose the oddest of moments. Even when his attention was definitely fixed on other things it would waft itself into his consciousness again—and always with the same serene yet vivid, naïve yet serious question in the eyes—a question surely that only life itself could answer, and that not always with a like candour or generosity. Alan was an obstinate young man in spite of appearances. But to have the rudiments of an imagination is one thing, to be at the beck and call of every passing fancy is quite another. He was not, he reassured himself, as silly as all that. He held out for days together; and then when he had been left for twenty-four hours wholly at peace—he suddenly succumbed.

A westering sun was sharply gilding its windows when he once more made his way into Mr. Elliott's parlour. It was empty. And almost at the same instant he realized how anxious he had been that this *should* be so, and how insipid a bait as such the little room now proved to be. He hadn't expected that. And yet—not exactly insipid; its flavour had definitely soured. He wished he had never come; he tried to make up his mind to go. Ill at ease, angry with himself, and as if in open defiance of some inward mentor, he took down at random a fusty old

quarto from its shelf and seating himself on a chair by the table, he began, or rather attempted, to read.

Instead, with downcast eyes shelled in by the palm of his hand, and leaning gently on his elbow in an attitude not unlike that of the slippered and pensive Keats in the portrait, he found himself listening again. He did more than listen. Every nerve in his body was stretched taut. And time ebbed away. At this tension his mind began to wander off again into a dreamlike vacuum of its own, when, 'What was that?' a voice within whispered at him. A curious thrill ebbed through his body. It was as though unseen fingers had tugged at a wire—with no bell at the end of it. For this was no sound he had heard —no stir of the air. And yet in effect it so nearly resembled one that it might have been only the sigh of the blast of the east wind at the window. He waited a minute, then, with a slight shiver, glanced up covertly but steadily through his fingers.

He was shocked—by what he saw—yet not astonished. It seemed as if his whole body had become empty and yet remained as inert and heavy as lead. He was no longer alone. The figure that stood before him in the darker corner there, and only a few paces away, was no less sharply visible and even more actual in effect than the objects around her. One hand, from a loose sleeve, resting on the edge of the door to the staircase, she stood looking at him, her right foot with its high-heeled shoe poised delicately on the lowest of the three steps. With head twisted back sidelong over her narrow shoulder, her eyes were fixed on this earthly visitor to her haunts—as he sat, hand to forehead, drawn up stiff and chill at the table. She was watching Alan. And the face, though with even fewer claims to be beautiful, and none to be better than knowing and wide awake, was without any

question the face he had shared with Herrick's *Hesperides*.

A peculiar vacancy—like a cold mist up from the sea—seemed to have spread over his mind, and yet he was alert to his very finger-tips. Had she seen he had seen her? He couldn't tell. It was as cold in the tiny room as if the windows were wide open and the garden beyond them full of snow. The late afternoon light, though bleakly clear, was already thinning away, and, victim of this silly decoy, he was a prisoner who in order to regain his freedom must pass *her* way out. He stirred in his chair, his eyes now fixed again on the book beneath them.

And then at last, as if with confidence restored, he withdrew his hand from his face, lifted his head, and affecting a boldness he far from felt, deliberately confronted his visitor. At this the expression on her features—her whole attitude—changed too. She had only at this moment seen that he had seen her, then? The arm dropped languidly to her side. Her listless body turned a little, her shoulders slightly lifted themselves, and a faint provocative smile came into her face, while the dark jaded eyes resting on his own remained half mocking, half deprecatory—almost as if the two of them, he and she, were old cronies who had met again after a long absence from one another, with ancient secrets awaiting discreet discussion. With a desperate effort Alan managed to refrain from making any answering signal of recognition. He stared back with a face as blank as a turnip. How he knew with such complete assurance that his visitor was not of this world he never attempted to explain to himself. Real! She was at least as real as a clearly lit reflection of anything seen in a looking-glass, and in *effect* on his mind more positive than the very

chair on which he was sitting and the table beneath his elbow to which that chair was drawn up. For this was a reality of the soul, and not of the senses. Indeed, he himself might be the ghost and she the dominating pervasive actuality.

But even if he had been able to speak he had no words with which to express himself. He was shuddering with cold and had suddenly become horribly fatigued and exhausted. He wanted to 'get out' of all this and yet knew not only that this phantasm must have been lying in wait for him, but that sooner or later she would compel him to find out what she wanted of him, that she meant to be satisfied. Her face continued to change in expression even while he watched her. Its assurance seemed to intensify. The head stooped forward a little; the narrow pallid slanting eyelids momentarily closed; and then, with a gesture not merely of arm or shoulder but of her whole body, she once more fixed him with a gaze more intense, more challenging, more crammed with meaning than he had supposed possible in any human eye. It was as if some small wicket gate into the glooms of Purgatory had suddenly become thronged with bright-lit faces.

Until this moment they had been merely eying one another while time's sluggish moments ebbed away. They had been merely 'looking at' one another. Now there had entered those glazed dark fixed blue eyes the very self within. It stayed there gazing out at him transfixed—the pleading, tormented, dangerous spirit within that intangible husk. And then the crisis was over. With a slow dragging movement of his head Alan had at last succeeded in breaking the spell—he had turned away. A miserable disquietude and self-repulsion possessed him. He felt sick, body and soul. He had but one

thought—to free himself once and for all from this unwarranted ordeal. Why should *he* have been singled out? What hint of any kind of 'encouragement' had he been responsible for? Or was this ghostly encounter an experience that had been shared by other visitors to the old bookseller's sanctum—maybe less squeamish than himself? His chilled bloodless fingers clenched on the open page of the book beneath them. He strove in vain to master himself, to fight the thing out. It was as if an icy hand had him in its grip daring him to stir.

The evening wind had died with the fading day. The three poplars, every budded double-curved twig outlined against the glassy grey of the west, stood motionless. Daylight, even dusk was all very well, but supposing this presence, as the dark drew on, ventured a little nearer? And suddenly his alarms—as much now of the body as of the mind—were over. She had been interrupted.

A footstep had sounded in the corridor. Alan started to his feet. The handle of the door had turned in the old brass lock; he watched it. With a jerk he twisted his head on his shoulders. He was alone. Yet again the interrupter had rattled impatiently with the door handle. Alan at last managed to respond to the summons. But even as he grasped the handle on his own side of it, the door was pushed open against him and a long bearded face peered through.

'Pardon,' said this stranger, 'I didn't realize you had locked yourself in.'

In the thin evening twilight that was now their only illumination Alan found himself blushing like a schoolgirl.

'But I hadn't,' he stammered. 'Of course not. The catch must have jammed. I came in here myself only a few minutes ago.'

The long face with its rather watery blue-grey eyes placidly continued to survey him in the dusk. 'And yet, you know,' its owner drawled, with a *soupçon* of incredulity, 'I should have guessed myself that I have been poking about in our patron's shop out there for at least the best part of half an hour. But that, of course, is one of the charms of lit-er-a-ture. You haven't chanced, I suppose, on a copy of the *Vulgar Errors*—Sir Thomas Browne?'

Alan shook his head. 'The B's I think are in that corner', he replied, '—alphabetical. But I didn't notice the *Errors*.'

Nor did he stay to help his fellow-customer find the volume. He hurried out, and this time he had no spoil to present to the old bookseller in recognition of the rent due for his occupation of the parlour.

A whole week went by, its last few days the battle-ground of a continuous conflict of mind. He hadn't, he assured himself with the utmost conviction, the faintest desire in the world to set eyes again on—on what he *had* set eyes on. That was certain. It had been the oddest of shocks to what he had thought about things, to what had gone before, and, yes, to his vanity. Besides, the more he occupied himself with and pondered over his peculiar little experience the more probable it seemed that it and she and everything connected with her had been nothing but a cheat of the senses, a triumph of self-deception—a pure illusion, induced by the quiet, the solitude, the stirrings of springtime at the window, the feeling of age in the room, the romantic associations—and last, to the Herrick!

All this served very well in the middle of the morning or at two o'clock in the afternoon. But a chance waft

of the year's first waxen hyacinths, the onset of evening, a glimpse of the waning moon—at any such oblique reminder of what had happened, these pretty arguments fell flat as a house of cards. Illusion! Then why had everything else in his life become by comparison so empty of interest and himself at a loose end? The thought of Mr. Elliott's bookshop at such moments was like an hypnotic lure. Cheat himself as he might, he knew it was only cheating. Distrust the fowler as he might, he knew what nets he was in. How gross a folly to be at the mercy of one vehement coupling of glances. If only it had been that other face! And yet, supposing he were wrong about all this; supposing this phantasm really was in need of help, couldn't rest, had come back for something—there *were* things one might want to come back for—and even for something which he alone could give?

What wonder this restless conflict of mind reacted on his body and broke his sleep? Naturally a little invalidish in his appetite, Alan now suffered the pangs of a violent attack of indigestion. And at last he could endure himself no longer. On the following Tuesday he once more pushed open the outer door of Mr. Elliott's bookshop, with its jangling bell, and entered, hot and breathless, from out of the pouring rain.

'There was a book I caught sight of,' he panted out to the old gentleman as he came in, 'when I was here last, you know. In the other room. I won't keep you a minute.'

At this, the bookseller's bland eye fixed itself an instant on the fair flushed face, almost as if he too could a tale unfold.

'Let me take your umbrella, sir,' he entreated. 'Sopping! A real downpour. But very welcome to the farmers,

I'll be bound, if for once in a while they'd only say so. No hurry whatever, sir.'

Downpour indeed it was. As Alan entered the parlour the cold sullen gush of rain on the young lilac buds and cobble-stones of the little yard in the dreary leaden light at the window resounded steadily on. He had set out in the belief that his one desire was to prove that his 'ghost' was no ghost at all, that he had been the victim of a pure hallucination. Yet throughout his journey, with only his umbrella for company, he had been conscious of a thrill of excitement and expectation. And now that he had closed the door behind him; and had shut himself in; the faded little room in this obscurity at once began to influence his mind in much the same fashion as the livid gloom of an approaching thunderstorm affects the scenery of the hills and valleys over which it broods.

And this, it soon seemed, was to be his sole reward! His excitement fizzled out. With every passing moment his heart fell lower. He had gone away filled with a stark irrational hatred of the poor restless phantasmal creature who had intruded on his solitude. He had come back only to realize not only that she herself had been his lodestone, but that, even though any particular spot may undoubtedly be 'haunted', it by no means follows that its ghost is always at home. Everything about him seemed to have changed a little. Or was the change only in himself? In this damp air the room smelt of dry-rot and mouldering leather. Even the pretty grate looked thicklier scurfed with rust. And the books on the shelves had now taken to themselves the leaden livery of the weather. 'Look not too closely on us,' they seemed to cry. 'What are we all but memorials of the dead? And we too are swiftly journeying towards the dust.'

The prospect from the window was even more desolating. None the less Alan continued to stare stupidly out of it. By the time he had turned away again he had become certain—though how he couldn't tell—that he need have no apprehension whatever of intangible company to-day. Mr. Elliott's 'parlour' was emptier than he supposed a room could be. It seemed as if by sheer aversion for its late inmate he had exorcised it, and, irrational creature that he was, a stab of regret followed.

He turned to go. He gave a last look round—and paused. Was it that the skies had lightened a little or had he really failed to notice at his entry that the door at which his visitor had appeared was a few inches open? He stepped across softly and glanced up the staircase. Only vacancy there too. But that door was also ajar. The two faint daylights from above and below mingled midway. For a moment or two he hesitated. The next he had stolen swiftly and furtively up the staircase and had looked in.

This room was not only empty but abandoned. It was naked of any stick of furniture and almost of any trace of human occupation. Yet, with its shallow bow window, low ceiling, and morning sun it must once in its heyday have blossomed like the rose. The flowered paper on its walls was dingy now; a few darker squares and oblongs alone showed where pictures had once hung. The brass gas bracket was green with verdigris, and a jutting rod was the only evidence of the canopy where once a bed had been.

But even vacancy may convey a sense of age and tell its tale. Alan was looking into the past. Indeed, the stale remnant of some once pervasive perfume still hung in the musty atmosphere of the room, though its sole refuse consisted of a few dust-grimed books in a corner

and—on a curved white narrow shelf that winged the minute fire-place—a rusty hairpin.

Alan stooped, and very gingerly, with gloved finger and thumb, turned the books over—a blistered green-bound *Enoch Arden*, a small thick copy of *The Mysteries of Paris*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *House of Life*, a *Nightingale Valley*, a few damp fly-blown shockers, some of them in French and paper-bound; and last, a square black American cloth-bound exercise book with *E.F.* cut out with a clumsy pen-knife at one of the top corners. The cockled cloth was slightly greened.

He raised the cover with the extreme tips of his fingers, stooped forward a little, and found himself in the window-light scanning with peculiar intensity the vanishing lineaments of a faded photograph—the photograph of a young woman in clothes somehow made the more old-fashioned in appearance by the ravages of time and light on the discoloured cardboard. He knew this face; and yet not *this* face. For days past it had not been out of his mind for more than a few hours together. But while his first impression had been that of the vivid likeness of the one to the other, what next showed clearest were the differences between them. Differences that stirred his heart into a sudden tumult.

The hair in the photograph was dressed in pretty much the same fashion—drawn up and back from the narrow temples across the widening head. The lips were, possibly, not so full; certainly not so dark. And though the cheek even of this much younger face was a little sunken, these faded eyes—a fading only of the paper depicting them and not of age—looked out at him without the faintest trace of boldness or effrontery. They were, it is true, fixed profoundly on his own. But they showed no interest in him, little awareness, no speculation—only

a remote settled melancholy. What strange surmises, the young man reflected, must the professional photographer at times indulge in when from beneath his ink-black inquisitorial velvet cowl he peers into his camera at a face as careless of human curiosity as this had been. The young woman in the photograph had made, if any, a more feeble attempt to conceal her secret sorrows than a pall to conceal its bier or a broken sepulchre its bones.

At a breath the young man's aversion had died away. A shame-stricken compassion of which he had never dreamed himself capable swept over him in its stead. He gazed on for a minute or two at the photograph—this withering memento which not even the removing men seemed to have considered worth flinging into a dust-bin; then he opened the book at random—towards the middle of it—and leaning into the light at the window read these lines:

My midnight lamp burns dim with shame,
In Heaven the moon is low;
Sweet sharer of its secret flame,
Arise, and go!

Haste, for dawn's envious gaping grave
Bids thee not linger here;
Though gone is all I am, and have—
Thy ghost once absent, dear.

He read them over again, then glanced stealthily up and out. They were a voice from the dead. It was as if he had trespassed into the echoing cold of a vault. And as he looked about him he suddenly realized that at any moment he might be interrupted, caught—prying. With a swift glance over his shoulder he pushed the photograph back into the old exercise book, and tucking this under his arm beneath his coat, tiptoed down the unlighted stairs into the parlour.

It had been a bold venture—at least for Alan. For, of all things in this world he disliked, he disliked by far the most being caught out in any little breach of the conventions. Suppose that old cod-like Mrs. Elliott had caught him exploring this abandoned bedroom? After listening yet again for any rumour either of herself or of her husband, he drew out from the lowest shelf near-by two old sheepskin folios, seated himself in full view of the door that led into the shop, and having hidden the exercise book well within cover of these antiquated tomes he began to turn over its pages. The trick took him back to his early schooldays—the sun, the heat, the drone of bees at the window, a settling wayward fly, the tick of the clock on the wall, and the penny 'blood' half concealed in his arithmetic book. He smiled to himself. Wasn't he being kept in now? And how very odd he should be minding so little what, only an hour before, he had foreseen he would be minding so much. How do ghosts *show* that you needn't expect them? Not even in their chosen haunts?

The book he was now examining was not exactly a penny 'blood'. In spite of appearances it must have cost at least sixpence. The once black ink on its pages had faded, and mildew dappled the leaves. The handwriting was irregular, with protracted loops. And what was written in the book consisted of verses, interlarded with occasional passages in prose, and a day or a date here and there, and all set down apparently just as it had taken the writer's fancy. And since many of the verses were heavily corrected and some of them interlined, Alan concluded—without any very unusual acumen!—that they were home-made. Moreover, on evidence as flimsy as this, he had instantly surmised who this E.F. was, and that here was not only her book but a book of her own

authorship. So completely, too, had his antipathy to the writer of it now vanished out of memory, so swiftly had the youthful, tragic face in the photograph secreted itself in his sentiments, that he found himself reading these scribbled 'effusions' with a mind all but bereft of its critical faculties. And of these the young man had hitherto rather boasted himself.

Still, poetry, good or bad, depends for its very life on the hospitable reader, as tinder awaits the spark. After that, what else matters? The flame leaps, the bosom glows! And as Alan read on he never for an instant doubted that here, however faultily expressed, was what the specialist is apt to call 'a transcript of life'. He knew of old—how remotely of old it now seemed—what feminine wiles are capable of; but here, surely, was the truth of self to self. He had greedily and yet with real horror looked forward to his reappearance here, as if Mr. Elliott's little parlour was the positive abode of the Evil One. And yet now that he was actually pecking about beneath the very meshes of his nets, he was drinking in these call-notes as if they were cascading down upon him out of the heavens from the throat of Shelley's skylark itself. For what is Time to the artifices of Eros? Had he not (with Chaucer's help) once fallen head over ears in love with the faithless Criseyde? He drank in what he had begun to read as if his mind were a wilderness thirsty for rain, though the pall of cloud that darkened the window behind him was supplying it in full volume. He was elated and at the same time dejected at the thought that, may be, he was the very first human creature, apart from the fountain head, to sip of these secret waters.

And he had not read very far before he realized that its contents referred to an actual experience as well as to one of the imagination. He realized too that the earlier

poems had been written at rather long intervals, and though he doubted very much if they were first attempts, that their technique tended to improve as they went on—at least, that of the first twenty poems or so. With a small ivory pocket paper-knife which he always carried about with him he was now delicately separating page 12 from page 13, and he continued to read at random:

There was sweet water once,
Where in my childhood I
Watched for the happy innocent nonce
Day's solemn clouds float by.

O age blur not that glass;
Kind Heaven still shed thy rain;
Even now sighs shake me as I pass
Those gentle haunts again.

He turned over the page:

Lullay, my heart, and find thy peace
  Where thine old solitary pastures lie;
Their light, their dews need never cease,
  Their sunbeams from on high.

Lullay, and happy dream, nor roam,
  Wild though the hills may shine,
Once there, thou soon would'st long for home,
  As I for mine!

and then:

Do you see; O, do you see?—
  Speak—and some inward self that accent knows,
  Bidding the orient East its rose disclose—
And daybreak wake in me.

Do you hear? O, do you hear?—
  This heart whose pulse like menacing night-bird cries?
  Dark, utter dark, my loved, is in these eyes
When gaunt goodbye draws near.

and then, after a few more pages:

'There is a garden in her face:'
My face! Woe's me were *that* my all!—
Nay, but my *self*, though thine its grace,
Thy fountain is, thy peach-bloomed wall.

Come soon that twilight dusky hour,
When thou thyself shalt enter in
And take thy fill of every flower,
Since thine they have always been.

No rue? No myrrh? No nightshade? Oh,
Tremble not, spirit! All is well.
For Love's is that lovely garden; and so,
There only pleasures dwell.

Turning over the limp fusty leaves, one by one, he browsed on:

When you are gone, and I'm alone,
From every object that I see
Its secret source of life is flown:
All things look cold and strange to me.

Even what I use—my rings, my gloves,
My parasol, the clothes I wear—
'Once she was happy; now she loves!
Once young,' they cry, 'now carked with care!'

I wake and watch when the moon is here—
A shadow tracks me on. And I—
Darker than any shadow—fear
Her fabulous inconstancy.

That sphinx, the Future, marks its prey;
I who was ardent, sanguine, free,
Starve now in fleshly cell all day—
And yours the rusting key.

and then:

Your maddening face befools my eyes,
Your hand—I wake to feel—
Lost in deep midnight's black surmise—
Its touch my veins congeal.

What peace for me in star or moon?
What solace in nightingale!
They tell me of the lost and gone—
And dawn completes the tale.

A note in pencil—the point of which must have broken in use—followed at the foot of the page:

'All this means all but *nothing* of what was in my mind when I began to write it. *Dawn!!* I look at it, read it—it is like a saucer of milk in a cage full of asps. I didn't *know* one's mind could dwell only on one thought, one face, one longing, on and on without any respite, and yet remain sane. I didn't even know—until when?—it was possible to be happy, unendurably happy, and yet as miserable and as hopeless as a devil in hell. It is as if I were sharing my own body with a self I hate and fear and shake in terror at, and yet am powerless to be rid of. Well, never mind. If I *can* go on, that's my business. They mouth and talk and stare and sneer at me. What do I care! The very leaves of the trees whisper against me, and last night came thunder. I see my hunted face in every stone. And what cares *he*! Why should he? Would *I*, if I were a man? I sit here alone in the evening—waiting. My heart is a quicksand biding its time to swallow me up. Yet it isn't even that I question now whether he ever loved me or not—I only thirst and thirst for him to come. One look, a word, and I am at peace again. At peace! And yet I wonder sometimes, if I—if it is even *conceivable* that I still love him. Does steel *love* the magnet? Surely that moon which shone last night with her haggard glare in both our faces *abhors* the earth from which, poor wretch, she parted to perish and yet from which she can never, never, never utterly break away? Never, never, never. Oh God, how tired I am!

—knowing as I do—as if my life were all being lived over again—that only worse lies in wait for me, that the more I feel the less able I am to please him. I *see* myself dragging on and on—and that other sinister mocking one within rises up and looks at me—"What? And shall *I* never come into my own!"'

Alan had found some little difficulty in deciphering the faint, blurred, pencilled handwriting—he decided to come back to this page again, then turned it over and read on:

Your hate I see, and can endure, nay, *must*—
Endure the stark denial of your love;
It is your *silence*, like a cankering rust,
That I am perishing of.

What reck you of the blinded hours I spend
Crouched on my knees beside a shrouded bed?
Grief even for the loveliest has an end;
No end in one whose soul it is lies dead.

I watch the aged who've dared the cold slow ice
That creeps from limb to limb, from sense to sense,
Yet never dreamed this also is the price
Which youth must pay for a perjured innocence.

Yours that fond lingering lesson. Be content!
Not one sole moment of its course I rue.
The all I had was little. Now it's spent.
Spit on the empty purse: 'tis naught to you.

And then these 'Lines on Ophelia':

She found an exit from her life;
She to an earthly green-room sped
Where parched-up souls distraught with strife
Sleep and are comforted.

Hamlet! I know that dream-drugged eye,
That self-coiled melancholic mien!
Hers was a happy fate—to die:
Mine—her foul Might-have-been.

and then:

To-morrow waits me at my gate,
While all my yesterdays swarm near;
And one mouth whines, Too late, too late
And one is dumb with fear.

Was this the all that life could give
Me—who from cradle hungered on,
Body and soul aflame, to *live*—
Giving my all—and then be gone?

O sun in heaven, to don that shroud,
When April's cuckoo thrilled the air!
Light thou no more the fields I loved.
Be only winter there!

and then:

Have *done* with moaning, idiot heart;
If it so be that Love has wings
I with my shears will find an art
To still his flutterings.

Wrench off that bandage too will I,
And show the imp he is blind indeed;
Hot irons shall prove my mastery;
He shall not weep, but bleed.

And when he is dead, and cold as stone,
Then in his Mother's book I'll con
The lesson none need learn alone,
And, callous as she, play on.

He raised his eyes. The heavy rain had ebbed into a drifting drizzle; the day had darkened. He stared vacantly for a moment or two out of the rain-drenched window, and then, turning back a few of the damp cockled leaves, once more resumed his reading:

And when at last I journey where
All thought of you I must resign,
Will the least memory of me be fair,
Or will you even my ghost malign?

I plead for nothing. Nay, Time's tooth—
That frets the very soul away—
May prove at last your slanders *truth*,
And me the Slut you say.

There followed a series of unintelligible scrawls. It was as if the writer had been practising a signature in various kinds of more or less affected handwritings: 'Esther de Bourgh, Esther de Bourgh, Esther De Bourgh, E. de Bourgh, E de B, E de B, E. de Ice Bourgh, Esther de la Ice Bourgh, Esther de Borgia, Esther Césarina de Borgia, Esther de Bauch, Esther de Bausch, E. de Bosh. And then, this unfinished scrap:

Why cheat the heart with old deceits?—
Love—was it *love* in thine
Could leave me thus grown sick of sweets
And . . .

The words sounded on—forlornly and even a little self-pityingly—in Alan's mind. Sick of sweets, sick of sweets. He had had enough for to-day. He shut the book, lifted his head, and with a shuddering yawn and a heavy frown on his young face, once more stared out of the window.

This E.F., whoever she was, had often sat in this room, alert, elated, drinking in its rosily reflected morning sunshine from that wall, happy even in being merely herself, young, alone, and alive. He could even watch in fancy that intense lowered face as she stitched steadily on, lost in a passionate reverie, while she listened to as dismal a downpour as that which had but lately ceased on the moss-grown cobbles beneath its sill. It's only one's inmost *self* that matters, she had scribbled at the end of one of her rhymes. And then—how long afterwards?—the days, empty of everything but that horror and dryness of the heart, when desire had corrupted and hope was gone, and every hour of solitude must have seemed to

be lying in wait only to prove the waste, the bleakness, the desolation to which the soul within can come. No doubt in time they would learn even a bookworm to be a worm. 'That is one of the charms of lit-er-a-ture,' as the bland, bearded, supercilious gentleman had expressed it. But he wouldn't have sentimentalized about it.

Oddly enough, it hadn't yet occurred to Alan to speculate what kind of human being it was to whom so many of these poems had been addressed, and to whom seemingly every one of them had clearer or vaguer reference. There are ghosts for whom spectre is the better word. In this, the gloomiest hour of an English spring, he glanced again at the door he had shut behind him in positive hope that it might yet open once more—that he was not so utterly alone as he seemed. Sick: sick: surely, surely a few years of life could not have wreaked such horrifying changes in any human face and spirit as that!

But the least promising method apparently of evoking a visitant from another world is to wait on to welcome it. Better, perhaps, postpone any little experiment of this kind until after the veils of nightfall have descended. Not that he had failed to notice how overwhelming is the evidence that when once you have gone from this world you have gone for ever. Still, even if he *had* been merely the victim of an illusion, it would have been something just to smile or to nod in a common friendly human fashion, to lift up the dingy little black exercise book in his hand, merely to show that its owner had not confided in him in vain.

He was an absurdly timid creature—tongue-tied when he wanted most to express himself. And yet, if only. . . . His glance strayed from door to book again. It was curious that the reading of poems like these should yet have proved a sort of solace. They had triumphed even

over the miserable setting destiny had bestowed on them. Surely lit-er-a-ture without any vestige of merit in it couldn't do that. A veil of day-dream drew over the fair and rather effeminate face. And yet the young man was no longer merely brooding; he was beginning to make plans. And he was making them without any help from the source from which it might have been expected.

Seeming *revenants*, of course, in this busy world are not of much account. They make indelible impressions if they do chance to visit one, though it is imprudent, perhaps, to share them with the sceptic. None the less at this moment he was finding it almost impossible to recall the face not of the photograph but of his phantasm. And though there was nothing in the earlier poems he had read to suggest that they could not have been the work of the former, was it conceivable that they could ever have been the work of—that other one? But why not! To judge from some quite famous poets' faces their owners would have flourished at least as successfully in the pork-butchering line. Herrick himself—well, he was not exactly ethereal in appearance. But what need for these ridiculous unanswerable questions? Whoever *E.F.* had been, and whatever the authorship of the poems, he himself could at least claim now to be their only re-begetter.

At this thought a thrill of excitement had run through Alan's veins. Surely the next best thing to publishing a first volume of verse of one's own—and that he had now decided never to attempt—is to publish someone else's. He had seen worse stuff than this in print, and on hand-made paper too. Why shouldn't he turn editor? How could one tell for certain that it is impossible to comfort —or, for that matter, to soothe the vanity—of some poor soul simply because it has happened to set out on the

last long journey a few years before oneself? Mere initials are little short of anonymity, and even kindred spirits may be all the kinder if kept at the safe distance which anonymity ensures. But what about the old bookseller? An Englishman's shop is his castle, and this battered old exercise book, Alan assumed, must fully as much as any other volume on the shelves around him be the legal property of the current tenant of the house. Or possibly the ground-landlord's? He determined to take Mr. Elliott into his confidence—but very discreetly.

With this decision, he got up—dismayed to discover that it was now a full half-hour after closing time. None the less he found the old bookseller sitting at his table and apparently lost to the cares of business beneath a wire-protected gas-bracket now used for an electric bulb. The outer door was still wide open, and the sullen clouds of the last of evening seemed to have descended even more louringly over the rain-soaked streets. A solitary dog lopped by the shrouded entrance. Not a sound pierced the monotony of the drizzle.

'I wonder,' Alan began, keeping the inflexions of his voice well in check, 'I wonder if you have ever noticed *this* particular book? It is in manuscript. . . . Verse.'

'Verse, sir?' said the bookseller, fumbling in a tight waistcoat pocket for the silver case of his second pair of spectacles. 'Well, now, verse—in manuscript. *That* doesn't sound as if it's likely to be of much value, though finds there have been, I grant you. Poems and sermons —we are fairly glutted out with them nowadays; still, there was this Omar Khayyám fuss, sir, so you never know.'

He adjusted his spectacles and opened the book where the book opened itself. Alan stooped over the old man's shoulder and read with him:

Once in kind arms, alas, you held me close;
Sweet to its sepals was the unfolding rose.
Why, then—though wind-blown, hither, thither,
I languish still, rot on, and wither
Yet *live*, God only knows.

A queer, intent, an almost hunted expression drew over Mr. Elliott's greyish face as he read on.

'Now I wonder,' he said at last, firmly laying the book down again and turning an eye as guileless as an infant's to meet Alan's scrutiny, 'I wonder now who could have written that? Not that I flatter myself to be much of a judge. I leave that to my customers, sir.'

'There is an *E.F.* cut out on the cover,' said Alan, 'and', the words came with difficulty, 'there is a photograph inside. But then I suppose,' he added hastily, automatically putting out his hand for the book and withdrawing it again, 'I suppose just a loose photograph doesn't prove anything. Not at least to whom it belonged—the book, I mean.'

'No, sir,' said the bookseller, as if he thoroughly enjoyed little problems of this nature; 'in a manner of speaking I suppose it don't.' But he made no attempt to find the photograph, and a rather prolonged pause followed.

'It's quiet in that room in there,' Alan managed to remark at last. 'Extraordinarily quiet. You haven't yourself, I suppose, ever noticed the book before?'

Mr. Elliott removed both pairs of spectacles from the bridge of his nose. 'Quiet is the word, sir,' he replied, in a voice suiting the occasion. 'And it's quieter yet in the two upper rooms above it. Especially of a winter's evening. Mrs. Elliott and me don't use that part of the house much, though there is a good bit of lumber stowed away in the nearest of 'em. We can't sell more than a fraction of the books we get, sir, so we store what's over

up there for the pulpers. I doubt if I have even so much as seen the inside of the other room these six months past. As a matter of fact,' he pursed his mouth and nodded, 'what with servant-girls and the like, and not everybody being as commonsensical as most, we don't mention it much.'

The bookseller's absent eye was now fixed on the rain-soaked street, and Alan waited, leaving his 'What?' unsaid.

'You see, sir, the lady that lived with Dr. Marchmont here—his niece, or ward or whatever it may be—well, they say she came to what they call an untimely end. A love affair. But there, for the matter of that you can't open your evening newspaper without finding more of such things than you get in a spring season's fiction. Strychnine, sir—that was the way of it; and it isn't exactly the poison I myself should choose for the purpose. It erects up the body like an arch, sir. So.' With a gesture of his small square hand Mr. Elliott pictured the effect in the air. 'Dr. Marchmont hadn't much of a practice by that time, I understand; but I expect he came to a pretty sudden standstill when he saw *that* on the bed. A tall man, sir, with a sharp nose.'

Alan refrained from looking at the bookseller. His eyes stayed fixed on the doorway which led out into the world beyond, and they did not stir. But he had seen the tall dark man with the sharp nose as clearly as if he had met him face to face, and was conscious of a repulsion far more deadly than the mere features would seem to warrant. And yet; *why* should he have come to a 'standstill' quite like that if . . . But the bookseller had opened the fusty mildewed book at another page. He sniffed, then having rather pernicketily adjusted his spectacles, read over yet another of the poems:

Esther! came whisper from my bed.
Answer me, Esther—are you there?
'Twas waking self to self that's dead
Called on the empty stair.

Stir not that pit; she is lost and gone.
A Jew decoyed her to her doom.
Sullenly knolls her passing bell
Mocking me in the gloom.

The old man gingerly turned the leaf, and read on:

Last evening, as I sat alone—
Thimble on finger, needle and thread—
Light dimming as the dusk drew on,
I dreamed that I was dead.

Like wildering timeless plains of snow
Which bitter winds to ice congeal
The world stretched far as sight could go
'Neath skies as hard as steel.

Lost in that nought of night I stood
And watched my body—brain and breast
In dreadful anguish—in the mould
Grope to'rd its final rest.

Its craving dreams of sense dropped down
Like crumbling maggots in the sod:
Spectral, I stood; all longing gone,
Exiled from hope and God.

And you I loved, who once loved me,
And shook with pangs this mortal frame,
Were sunk to such an infamy
That when I called your name,

Its knell so racked that sentient clay
That my lost spirit lurking near,
Wailed, like the damned, and fled away—
And woke me, stark with *Fear.*

He pondered a moment, turned back the leaf again, and holding the book open with his dumpy forefinger, 'A *Jew* now,' he muttered to himself, 'I never heard any

mention of a Jew. But what, if you follow me,' he added, tapping on the open page with his spectacles, 'what I feel about such things as these is that they're not so much what may be called mournful as *morbid*, sir. They rankle. I don't say, mind you, there isn't a ring of truth in them—but it's so *put*, if you follow me, as to make it worse. Why, if all our little mistakes were dealt with in such a vengeful spirit as this—as *this*, where would any of us be? And death . . . Say things out, sir, by all means. But what things? It isn't human nature. And what's more,' he finished pensively, 'I haven't noticed that the stuff *sells* much the better for it.'

Alan had listened but had not paid much attention to these moralizings. 'You mean', he said, 'that you think the book *did* actually belong to the lady who lived here, and that—that it was she herself who wrote the poems? But then you see it's *E.F.* on the cover, and I thought you said the name was Marchant?'

'Yes, sir, Marchmont. Between you and me, there *was* a Mrs., I understand; but she went away. And who this young woman was I don't rightly know. Not much good, I fancy. At least . . .' he emptily eyed again the blurred lettering of the poem. 'But there, sir,' he went on with decision, 'there's no need that I can see to worry about that. The whole thing's a good many years gone, and what consequence is it now? You'd be astonished how few of my customers really care who wrote a book so long as wrote it was. Which is not to suggest that if we could get someone—someone with a name, I mean—to lay out the full story of the young woman as a sort of foreword, there might not be money in it. There *might* be. It doesn't much signify nowadays what you say about the dead, not legally, I mean. And especially these poets, sir. It all goes in under 'biography'. Be-

sides, a suicide's a suicide all the world over. On the other hand——' and he glanced over his shoulder, 'I rather fancy Mrs. E. wouldn't care to be mixed up in the affair. What she reads she never much approves of, though that's the kind of reading she likes best. The ladies can be so very scrupulous.'

Alan had not seen the old bookseller in quite so bright a light as this before.

'What I was wondering, Mr. Elliott,' he replied in tones so frigid they suggested he was at least twenty years older than he appeared to be, 'is whether you would have any objection to my sending the book myself to the printers. It's merely an idea. One can't tell. It could do no harm. Perhaps who*ever* it was who wrote the poems may have hoped some day to get them printed—you never know. It would be at my expense, of course. I shouldn't dream of taking a penny piece and I would rather there were no introduction—by *any* one. There need be no name or address on the title-page, need there? But this is of course only if you see no objection?'

Mr. Elliott had once more lifted by an inch or two the back cover of the exercise book, as if possibly in search of the photograph. He found only this pencilled scrawl:

> Well, well, well! squeaked the kitten to the cat;
> Mousie refuses to play any more! so that's the end of that!

He shut up the book and rested his plump small hand on it.

'I suppose, sir,' he enquired discreetly, 'there *isn't* any risk of any infringement of copyright? I mean', he added, twisting round his unspectacled face a little in Alan's direction, 'there isn't likely to be anybody who would *recognize* what's in here? I am not of course referring to the photograph, but a book, even nowadays, may be

what you may call *too* true-spoken—when it's new, I mean. And it's not so much Mrs. E. I have in mind now as the police,' he whispered the word—'the *police*.'

Alan returned his blurred glance without flinching.

'Oh, no . . .' he said. 'Besides I should merely put *E.F.* on the title-page and say it had been printed privately. I am quite prepared to take the risk.'

The cold tones of the young man seemed to have a little daunted the old bookseller.

'Very well, sir. I will have just a word with a young lawyer friend of mine, and if that's all right, why, sir, you are welcome.'

'And the books could be sold from here?'

'"Sold?" Why, yes, sir—they'll have plenty of respectable company, at any rate.'

But if Alan had guilelessly supposed that the mere signing of a cheque for £33 10*s*. in settlement of a local printer's account would finally exile a ghost that now haunted his mind far more persistently than it could ever have haunted Mr. Elliott's green parlour, he soon discovered his mistake. He had kept the photograph, but had long since given up any attempt to find his way through the maze in which he found himself. Why, why, should he concern himself with what an ill-starred life had done to that young face? If the heart, if the very soul is haunted by a ghost, need one heed the frigid dictates of the mind? Infatuated young man, he was in servitude to one who had left the world years before he was born, and had left it, it seemed, only the sweeter by her exit. He was sick for love of one who was once alive but was now dead, and—why should he deny it? Mrs. E. wouldn't—damned.

Still, except by way of correspondence he avoided Mr. Elliott and his parlour for weeks, until in fact the poems

were finally in print, until their neat grey deckled paper covers had been stitched on, and the copies were ready for a clamorous public! So it was early one morning in the month of June before he once more found himself in the old bookseller's quiet annexe. The bush of lilac, stirred by the warm languid breeze at the window, was shaking free its faded once-fragrant tassels of bloom and tapering heart-shaped leaves from the last dews of night. The young poplars stood like gold-green torches against the blue of the sky. A thrush was singing somewhere out of sight. It was a scene worthy of Arcady.

Alan had trailed through life without any positive need to call on any latent energy he might possess. And now that he had seen through the press his first essay in publishing a reaction had set in. A cloud of despondency shadowed his young features as he stared out through the glass of the window. Through the weeks gone by he had been assuring himself that it was no more than an act of mere decency to get the poems into print. A vicarious thirty pounds or so, just to quiet his conscience. What reward was even thinkable? And yet but a few nights before he had found himself sitting up in bed in the dark of the small hours just as if there had come a tap upon the panel of his door or a voice had summoned him out of dream. He had sat up, leaning against his bed-rail, exhausted by his few hours' broken sleep. And in the vacancy of his mind had appeared yet again in silhouette against the dark the living presentment of the young face in the photograph. Merely the image of a face floating there, with waxen downcast lids, the features passive as those of a death-mask—as unembodied an object as the after-image of a flower. There was no speculation in the downcast eyes, and in that lovely longed-for face; no, nothing whatever for *him*—and it had faded out as a mir-

age of green-fronded palm trees and water fades in the lifeless sands of the desert.

He hadn't any desire to sleep again that night. Dreams might come; and wakeful questions pestered him. How old was she when the first of the poems was written? How old when no more came, and she herself had gone on—gone on? That barren awful road of disillusionment, satiety, self-disdain. Had she even when young and untroubled ever been happy? Was what she had written even true? How far are poems *true*? What had really happened? What had been left out? You can't even tell—yourself—what goes on in the silent places of your mind when you have swallowed, so to speak, the dreadful *out*side things of life. What, for example, had *Measure for Measure* to do with the author of *Venus and Adonis*, and what *Don Juan* with Byron as a child? One thing, young women of his own day didn't take their little affairs like that. They kept life in focus. But that ghost! The ravages, the paint, the insidiousness, the very clothes!

Coming to that, then, who the devil had he been taking such pains over? The question kept hammering at his mind day after day; it was still unanswered, showed no promise of an answer. And the Arcadian scene beyond the windows suddenly became an irony and a jeer. The unseen bird itself sang on in vulgar mockery, 'Come *off* of it! Come off of it! Come off of it! Dolt, dolt, dolt!'

He turned away out of the brightness of the light, and fixed his eyes on the bulky brown paper package that contained the printed volumes. It was useless to stay here any longer. He would open the package, but merely to take a look at a copy and assure himself that no ingenuity of the printer had restored any little aberration

of spelling or punctuation which he himself had corrected three times in the proofs. He knew the poems—or some of them—by heart now.

With extreme reluctance he had tried one or two of them on a literary friend—'An anonymous thing, you know, I came across it in an old book.'

The friend had been polite rather than enthusiastic. After, cigarette between fingers, idly listening to a few stanzas, he had smiled and asked Alan if he had ever read a volume entitled *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell.*

'Well, there you are! A disciple of Acton's, dear boy, if you ask *me*. Stuff as common as blackberries!'

And Alan had welcomed the verdict. He didn't want to share the poems with anybody. If nobody bought them and nobody cared, what matter? All the better. And he wasn't being sentimental about them now either. He didn't care if they had any literary value or not. He had entrusted himself with them, and that was the end of the matter. What was Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba? What?

And what did it signify that he had less right to the things even than Mrs. Elliott—who fortunately was never likely to stake any claim. The moral ashbins old women can be, he thought bitterly. Simply because this forlorn young creature of the exercise book had been forced at last to make her exit from the world under the tragic but hardly triumphant arch of her own body this old woman had put her hand over her mouth and looked 'volumes' at that poor old hen-pecked husband of hers even at mention of her name. Suicides, of course, are a nuisance in any house. But all those years gone by! And what did they *know* the poor thing had done to merit their insults? *He* neither knew nor cared, yet for some obscure reason steadily wasted at least five minutes in un-

tying the thick knotted cord of the parcel instead of chopping it up with his pocket knife in the indignant fashion which he had admired when he visited the printers.

The chastest little pile of copies was disclosed at last in their grey-blue covers and with their enrichingly rough edges. The handmade paper had been an afterthought. A further cheque was due to the printer, but Alan begrudged not a farthing. He had even incited them to be expensive. He believed in turning things out nicely—even himself. He and his pretty volumes were 'a pair'!

Having opened the parcel, having neatly folded up its prodigal wrappings of brown paper, and thrown away the padding and hanked the string, there was nothing further to do. He sat back in Mr. Elliott's old Windsor chair, leaning his chin on his knuckles. He was waiting, though he didn't confess it to himself. What he did confess to himself was that he was sick of it all. Age and life's usage may obscure, cover up, fret away a fellow creature at least as irrevocably as six feet of common clay.

When then he raised his eyes at some remote inward summons he was already a little hardened in hostility. He was looking clean across the gaily-lit room at its other occupant standing there in precisely the same attitude—the high-heeled shoe coquettishly arched on the lowest of the three steps, the ridiculous flaunting hat, the eyes aslant beneath the darkened lids casting back on him their glitter from over a clumsy blur that was perfectly distinct on the cheek bone in the vivid light of this June morning. And even this one instant's glimpse clarified and crystallized all his old horror and hatred. He knew that she had seen the tender firstfruits on the table. He knew that he had surprised a gleam of triumph in her snakish features, and he knew that she no more

cared for that past self and its literary exercises than she cared for his silly greenhorn tribute to them. What then was she after?

The darkening glittering spectral eyes were once more communicating with him with immense rapidity, and yet were actually conveying about as empty or as mindless a message as eyes can. If half extinguished fires in a dark room can be said to look coy, these did. But a coyness practised in a face less raddled and ravaged by time than by circumstance is not an engaging quality. 'Arch!' My God, 'arch' was the word!

Alan was shivering. How about the ravages that life's privy paw had made in his *own* fastidious consciousness? Had his own heart been a shade more faithful would the horror which he knew was now distorting his rather girlish features and looking out of his pale blue eyes have been quite so poisonously bitter?

Fortunately his back was turned to the window, and he could in part conceal his face with his hand before this visitor had had time to be fully aware what that face was saying. She had stirred. Her head was trembling slightly on her shoulders. Every tinily exquisite plume in the mauve ostrich feathers on her drooping hat trembled as if in sympathy. Her ringed fingers slipped down from the door to her narrow hip; her painted eyelids narrowed, as if she were about to speak to him. But at this moment there came a sudden flurry of wind in the lilac tree at the window, ravelling its dried-up flowers and silky leaves. She stooped, peered; and then, with a sharp, practised, feline, seductive nod, as bold as grass-green paint, she was gone. An instant or two, and in the last of that dying gust, the door above at the top of the narrow staircase, as if in a sudden access of bravado, violently slammed—'Touch me, tap at me, force me, if you dare!'

The impact shook the walls and rattled the windows of the room beneath. It jarred on the listener's nerves with the force of an imprecation. As abrupt a silence followed. Nauseated and slightly giddy he got up from his chair, resting his fingers automatically on the guileless pile of books, took up his hat, glanced vacantly at the gilded Piccadilly maker's name on the silk lining, and turned to go. As he did so, a woeful, shuddering fit of remorse swept over him, like a parched up blast of the sirocco over the sands of a desert. He shot a hasty strangulated look up the narrow empty staircase as he passed by. Then, 'Oh, God,' he groaned to himself, 'I wish—I *pray*—you poor thing, you could only be a little more at peace—whoever, wherever you are—whatever *I* am.'

And then he was with the old bookseller again, and the worldly-wise old man was eying him as ingenuously as ever over his steel-rimmed glasses.

'He isn't looking quite himself,' he was thinking. 'Bless me, sir,' he said aloud, 'sit down and rest a bit. You must have been overdoing it. You look quite het up.'

Alan feebly shook his head. His cheek was almost as colourless as the paper on which the poems had been printed; small beads of sweat lined his upper lip and damped his hair. He opened his mouth to reassure the old bookseller, but before he could utter a word they were both of them caught up and staring starkly at one another—like conspirators caught in the act. Their eyes met in glassy surmise. A low, sustained, sullen rumble had come sounding out to them from the remoter parts of the shop which Alan had but a moment before left finally behind him. The whole house shuddered as if at the menace of an earthquake.

'Bless my soul, sir!' cried the old bookseller. 'What in merciful heaven was that!'

He hurried out, and the next instant stood in the entry of his parlour peering in through a dense fog of dust that now obscured the light of the morning. It silted softly down revealing the innocent cause of the commotion. No irreparable calamity. It was merely that a patch of the old cracked plaster ceiling had fallen in, and a mass of rubble and plaster was now piled up, inches high, on the gate-leg table and the chair beside it, while the narrow laths of the ceiling above them, a few of which were splintered, lay exposed like the bones of a skeleton. A thick film of dust had settled over everything, intensifying with its grey veil the habitual hush of the charming little room. And almost at one and the same moment the old bookseller began to speculate first, what damages he might have been called upon to pay if his young customer had not in the nick of time vacated that chair, and next, that though perhaps his own little stock of the rare and the curious would be little the worse for the disaster, Alan's venture might be very much so. Indeed, the few that were visible of the little pile of books—but that morning come virgin and speckless from the hands of the binders—were bruised and scattered. And as Mr. Elliott eyed them, his conscience smote him: 'Softly now, softly,' he muttered to himself, 'or we shall have Mrs. E. down on this in pretty nearly no time!'

But Mrs. E. had not heard. No footfall sounded above; nothing stirred; all remained as it might be expected to remain. And Alan, who meanwhile had stayed motionless in the outer shop, at this moment joined the old bookseller, and looked in on the ruins.

'Well, there, sir,' Mr. Elliott solemnly assured him, 'all I can say is, it's a mercy you had come out of it. And by no more than a hair's breadth!'

But Alan made no answer. His mind was a void. He

was listening again—and so intently that it might be supposed the faintest stirrings even on the uttermost outskirts of the unseen might reach his ear. It was too late now—and in any case it hadn't occurred to him—to add to the title-page of his volume that well-worn legend, 'The heart knoweth his own bitterness; and a stranger doth not intermeddle with his joy.' But it might at least have served for his own brief *apologia*. He had meant well—it would have suggested. You never can tell.

As they stood there, then, a brief silence had fallen on the ravaged room. And then a husky, querulous, censorious voice had broken out behind the pair of them: 'Mr. E., where are you?'

THE ORGY: AN IDYLL

It was a Wednesday morning, and May-day, and London, its West End too, crisp, brisk, scintillating. Even the horses had come out in their Sunday best. With their nosegays and ribbons and rosettes they might have been on their way to a wedding—the nuptials of Labour and Capital, perhaps. As for people, the wide pavements of the great street were packed with them. Not so many busy idlers of the one sex as of the other, of course, at this early hour—a top-hat here, a pearl-grey Homburg there; but of the feminine a host as eager and variegated as the butterflies in an Alpine valley in mid-summer; some stepping daintily down from their landaulettes like 'Painted Ladies' out of the chrysalis, and thousands of others, blues and browns and speckleds and sables and tawnies and high-fliers and maiden's blushes, from all parts of the world and from most of the suburbs, edging and eddying along, this way, that way, their eyes goggling, their tongues clacking, but most of them, their backs to the highway, gazing, as though mesmerized, in and in through the beautiful plate-glass windows at the motley merchandise on the other side. And much of that on the limbs and trunks of beatific images

almost as life-like but a good deal less active than themselves.

The very heavens, so far as they could manage to peep under the blinds, seemed to be smiling at this plenty. Nor had they any need for care concerning the future, for nursemaids pushing their baby-carriages before them also paraded the pavements, their infant charges laid in dimpled sleep beneath silken awning and coverlet, while here and there a tiny tot chattered up into the air like a starling.

A clock, probably a church clock, and only just audible, struck ten. The sun from its heights far up above the roof-tops blazed down upon the polished asphalt and walls with such an explosion of splendour that it looked as if everything had been repainted overnight with a thin coat of crystalline varnish and then sprinkled with frozen sea-water. And every human creature within sight seemed to be as heart-free and gay as this beautiful weather promised to be brief. With one exception only —poor Philip Pim.

And why not? He was young—so young in looks, indeed, that if Adonis had been stepping along at his side they might have been taken for cousins. He was charmingly attired, too, from his little, round, hard felt hat—not unlike Mercury's usual wear, but without the wings —to his neat brogue shoes; and he was so blonde, with his pink cheeks and flaxen hair, that at first you could scarcely distinguish his silken eyebrows and eyelashes, though they made up for it on a second glance. Care seemed never to have sat on those young temples. Philip looked as harmless as he was unharmed.

Alas! this without of his had no resemblance whatever to his within. He eyed vacantly a buzzing hive-like abandonment he could not share; first, because though

he had the whole long day to himself he had no notion of what to do with it; and next, because only the previous afternoon the manager of the bank in which until then he had had a stool specially reserved for him every morning, had shaken him by the hand and had wished him well—for ever. He had said how deeply he regretted Philip's services could not be indulged in by the bank any longer. He would miss him. Oh yes, very much indeed—but missed Philip must be.

The fact was that Philip had never been able to add up pounds, shillings, and pence so that he could be certain the total was correct. His 9's, too, often looked like 7's, his 5's like 3's. And as 'simple addition' was all but his sole duty in the bank, he would not have adorned its premises for a week if his uncle, Colonel Crompton Pim, had not been acquainted with one of its most stylish directors, and was not in the habit of keeping a large part of his ample fortune in its charge. He had asked Mr. Bumbleton to give Philip a chance. But chances—some as rapidly as Manx cats—come to an end. And Philip's had.

Now, if Colonel Pim had sent his nephew when he was a small boy to a nice public school, he might have been able by this time to do simple sums very well indeed. Philip might have become an accurate adder-up. It is well to look on the bright side of things. Unfortunately when Philip was an infant, his health had not been very satisfactory—at least to his widowed mother—and he had been sent instead to a private academy. There a Mr. Browne was the mathematical master—a Mr. Browne so much attached to algebra and to reading *The Times* in school hours that he hadn't much patience with the rudiments of arithmetic. 'Just add it up', he would say, 'and look up the answer. And if it isn't right, do it again.'

It was imprudent of him, but in these early years poor Philip had never so much as dreamed that some day he was going to be a clerk on a stool. If he had, he might not perhaps have been so eager to look up the answers. But then, his uncle was fabulously rich and yet apparently unmarriageable, and Philip was his only nephew. Why, then, should he ever have paid any attention to banks, apart from the variety on which the wild thyme grows?

Term succeeded term, and still, though 'a promising boy', he remained backward—particularly in the last of the three R's. And his holidays, so called, would be peppered with such problems as (*a*) if a herring and a half cost three halfpence, how many would you get for a shilling? (*b*) If a brick weighs a pound and half a brick, how much does it weigh? (*c*) If Moses was the son of Pharaoh's daughter, etc.; and (*d*) Uncles and brothers have I none, and so on. And since, after successive mornings with a sheet of foolscap and a stub of pencil, Philip's answers would almost invariably reappear as (*a*) 18; (*b*) 1½ lb.; (*c*) his sister, and (*d*) himself, Colonel Pim grew more and more impatient, and Nature had long ago given him a good start.

He had a way, too, when carpeting poor Philip, of flicking his shepherd-plaid trouser-leg with his handkerchief, which seemed useless to everyone concerned. And at last, instead of transferring his nephew from Mr. Browne to Christ Church, Oxford, or to Trinity College, Cambridge, or to some less delectable resort at an outlying university, he first (before setting out in pursuit of big game all around the world), consigned him to a tutor, who thanked his lucky stars the expedition would take the Colonel a long time; and, on his return, gave them both a prolonged vacation.

And *then* had fallen the bolt from the blue. On the morning of his twenty-first birthday, which had promised to be so cool, so calm, so bright, Philip received a letter from his uncle. He opened it with joy; he read it with consternation. It was in terms as curt as they looked illegible, and it was merely to tell him that what the Colonel called a post (but which was, in fact, a high stool) had been secured for his nephew, and that unless Philip managed to keep his seat on it for twelve consecutive months he would be cut off with a shilling.

Of these drear months about two and a half had somehow managed to melt away, and now not only was the stool rapidly following them into the limbo of the past, but at this very moment the Colonel was doubtless engaged, and with his usual zest, in keeping his promise. What wonder, then, Philip was not exactly a happy young man as he wandered this sunny populous May morning aimlessly on his way. There was nothing—apart from Everything around him—to make him so, except only one minute stroke of luck that had befallen him before breakfast.

When he had risen from his tumbled bed in his London lodgings, the sight of his striped bank trousers and his black bank-coat and waistcoat had filled him with disgust. Opening the grained cupboard which did duty for a wardrobe—and in the indulgence of his tailor it was pretty full—he took down from a peg the festive suit he was now wearing, but which otherwise he had left unheeded since Easter. He found himself faintly whistling as he buttoned it on; but his delight can be imagined when, putting his finger and thumb into an upper waistcoat pocket, he discovered—a sovereign. And an excellent specimen of one, with St. George in his mantle and the dragon on the one side of it, and King Edward

VII's head—cut off at the neck as if he had sat to its designer in his bath—on the other. This, with four others very much like it, had been bestowed on Philip many months ago by his Uncle Charles—a maternal uncle, who had since perished in Paris. As the rest of Philip's pockets contained only $7\frac{1}{2}d.$ in all, this coin—how forgotten, he simply could not conjecture—was treasure trove indeed.

Now, poor Philip had never really cared for money. Perhaps he had always associated it with herrings and half-bricks. Perhaps he had never needed it quite enough. Since, moreover, immediately opposite his perch at the Bank there hung a framed antique picture of this commodity in process of being shovelled out of receptacles closely resembling coal-scuttles into great vulgar heaps upon a polished counter, and there weighed in brass scales like so much lard or glucose, he had come to like it less and less. On the other hand, he dearly enjoyed spending it. As with Adam and the happy birds in the Garden of Eden—linnet and kestrel and wren—he enjoyed seeing it fly. In this he was the precise antithesis of his uncle.

Colonel Crompton Pim loved money. He exulted in it (not vocally, of course) *en masse*, as the Pharaohs exulted in pyramids. And he abhorred spending it. For this (and for many another) reason he had little affection for mere objects—apart, that is, from *such* objects as golf clubs, shooting boots, or hippopotamus-hoof inkstands, and he had not the smallest pleasure in buying anything for mere buying's sake.

His immense dormitory near Cheltenham, it is true, was full of furniture, but it was furniture, acquired in the 'sixties or thereabouts, for use and not for joy. Prodigious chairs with pigskin seats; tables of a solidity that defied time and of a wood that laughed at the worm;

bedsteads of the Gog order; wardrobes resembling Assyrian sarcophagi; and ottomans which would seat with comfort and dignity a complete royal family. As for its 'ornaments', they came chiefly from Benares.

And simply because poor Philip delighted in spending money and hated impedimenta such as these with the contempt a humming-bird feels for the corpse of a rhinoceros, he had never been able to take to his uncle—not even for the sake of what he owned. And it was impossible—as he fondly supposed—for any human being to take to him for any other reason. No, there was nothing in common between them, except a few branches of the family tree. And these the Colonel might already have converted into firewood.

Now, as poor Philip meandered listlessly along the street, fingering his Uncle Charles's golden sovereign in his pocket, he came on one of those gigantic edifices wherein you can purchase anything in the world—from a white elephant to a performing flea, from a cargo of coco-nuts to a tin-tack. This was the 'store' at which his uncle 'dealt'. And by sheer force of habit, Philip mounted the welcoming flight of steps, crossed a large flat rubber mat, and went inside.

Having thus got safely in, he at once began to ponder how he was to get safely out—with any fraction, that is, of his golden sovereign still in his pocket. And he had realized in the recent small hours that with so little on earth now left to spend, except an indefinite amount of leisure, he must strive to spend that little with extreme deliberation.

So first, having breakfasted on a mere glance at the charred remnant of a kipper which his landlady had served up with his chicory, he entered a large gilded lift, or elevator, as the directors preferred to call it, *en route* to the

restaurant. There he seated himself at a vacant table and asked the waitress to be so kind as to bring him a glass of milk and a bun. He nibbled, he sipped, and he watched the people—if people they really were, and not, as seemed more probable, automata intended to advertise the Ecclesiastical, the Sports, the Provincial, the Curio, the Export, and the Cast-Iron Departments.

With his first sip of milk he all but made up his mind to buy a little parting present for his uncle. It would be at least a gentle gesture. With his second he decided that the Colonel would be even less pleased to receive a letter *and*, say, a velvet smoking-cap, or a pair of mother-of-pearl cuff-links, than just a letter. By the time he had finished his bun he had decided to buy a little something for himself. But try as he might he could think of nothing (for less than a guinea) that would be worthy of the shade of his beloved Uncle Charles. So having pushed seven-fifteenths of all he else possessed under his plate for his freckled waitress, with the remaining fourpence he settled his bill and went steadily downstairs. Nineteen minutes past ten—he would have a good look about him before he came to a decision.

Hunger, it has been said, sharpens the senses, but it is apt also to have an edgy effect upon the nerves. If, then, Philip's breakfast had been less exacting, or his lunch had made up for it, he might have spent the next few hours of this pleasant May morning as a young man should—in the open air. Or he might have visited the British Museum, the National Gallery, and Westminster Abbey. He might never, at any rate, in one brief morning of his mortal existence have all but died again and again of terror, abandon, shame, rapture, and incredulity. He might never—but all in good time.

He was at a loose end, and it is then that habits are apt

to prevail. And of all his habits, Philip's favourite was that of ordering 'goods' on behalf of his uncle. The Colonel in his fantastic handwriting would post him two weekly lists—one consisting of the 'wanted', the other of complaints about the previous week's 'supplied'. Armed with these, Philip would set out for the building he was now actually in. The first list, though not a thing of beauty, was a joy as long as it lasted. The second, for he had always flatly refused to repeat his uncle's sulphurous comments to any underling, he reserved for his old enemy, the secretary of the establishment, Sir Leopold Bull. And though in these weekly interviews Sir Leopold might boil with rage and chagrin, he never boiled over. For the name of Pim was a name of power in the secretary's office. The name of Pim was that of a heavy shareholder; and what the Colonel wanted he invariably in the long run got. A chest, say, of Ceylon tea, 'rich, fruity, bright infusion'; a shooting-stick (extra heavy, Brugglesdon tube pattern); a quart size tantalus, for a wedding present, with a double spring sterling silver Brahmin lock; a hundredweight of sago; a stymie, perhaps, or a click—something of that sort.

These 'order days' had been the balm of Philip's late existence. His eyes fixed on his ledger and his fancy on, say, 'Saddlery', or 'Sports', he looked forward to his Wednesdays—thirsted for them. Indeed, his chief regret at the bank, apart from little difficulties with his 9's and 3's, had been that his uncle's stores were closed on Saturday afternoons. And on Sundays. His hobby had, therefore, frequently given him indigestion, since he could indulge it only between 1 and 2 p.m. It was a pity, of course, that Colonel Pim was a man of wants so few, and those of so narrow a range. Possibly the suns of India had burned the rest out of him. But for Philip, any kind

of vicarious purchase had been better than none. And now these delights, too, were for ever over. His fountain had run dry. Sir Leopold had triumphed.

At this moment he found himself straying into the Portmanteau and Bag Department. There is nothing like leather, and here there was nothing *but* leather, and all of it made up into articles ranging in size from trunks that would hold the remains of a Daniel Lambert to card-cases that would hold practically nothing at all. And all of a sudden Philip fancied he would like to buy a cigarette-case. He would have preferred one of enamel or gold or morocco or tortoise-shell or lizard or shagreen; or even of silver or suède. But preferences are expensive. And as he sauntered on, his dreamy eye ranging the counters in search merely of a cigarette-case he could *buy*, his glance alighted on a 'gent's dressing-case'.

It was of pig-skin, and it lay, unlike the central figure in Rembrandt's 'Lesson in Anatomy', so that the whole of its interior was in full view, thus revealing a modest row of silver-topped bottles, similar receptacles for soap, tooth-brushes, hair-oil, and Eau de Cologne; a shoe-horn, a boot-hook, an ivory paper-knife, and hair brushes, 'all complete'. Philip mused on it for a moment or two, perplexed by a peculiar effervescence that was going on in his vitals. He then approached the counter and asked its price.

'The price, sir?' echoed the assistant, squinnying at the tiny oblong of pasteboard attached by a thread to the ring of the handle; 'the price of that article is seventeen, seventeen, six.'

He was a tubby little man with boot-button eyes, and his snort, Philip thought, was a trifle unctuous.

'Ah,' he said, putting a bold face on the matter, 'it

looks a sound workaday bag. A little mediocre perhaps. Have you anything—less ordinary?'

'Something more expensive, sir? Why, yes, indeed. This is only a stock line—the "Archdeacon" or "Country Solicitor" model. We have prices to suit all purses. Now if you were thinking of something which you might call resshersy, sir'—and Philip now was—'there's a dressing-case under the window over there was specially made to the order of Haitch Haitch the Maharaja of Jolhopollolulu. Unfortunately, sir, the gentleman deceased suddenly a week or two ago; climate, I understand. His funeral obliquies were in the newspaper, you may remember. The consequence being, his ladies not, as you might say, concurring, the dressing-case in a manner of speaking is on our hands—and at a considerable reduction. Only six hundred and seventy-five guineas, sir; or rupees to match.'

'May I look at it?' said Philip. 'Colonel Crompton Pim.'

'By all means, sir,' cried the little man as if until that moment he had failed to notice that Philip was a long-lost son; 'Colonel Crompton Pim; of course. Here is the article, sir, a very handsome case, and quite unique, one of the finest, in fact, I have ever had the privilege of handling since I was transferred to this Department—from the Sports, sir.'

He pressed a tiny knob, the hinges yawned, and Philip's mouth began to water. It was in sober sooth a handsome dressing-case, and the shaft of sunlight that slanted in on it from the dusky window seemed pleased to be exploring it. It was a dressing-case of tooled red Levant morocco, with gold locks and clasps and a lining of vermilion watered silk, gilded with a chaste design of lotus flowers, peacocks, and houris, the 'fittings' being of

gold and tortoise-shell, and studded with so many minute brilliants and seed pearls that its contents, even in that rather dingy sunbeam, appeared to be delicately on fire.

Philip's light blue eyes under their silken lashes continued to dwell on its charms in so spell-bound a silence that for a moment the assistant thought the young man was about to swoon.

'Thank you very much,' said Philip at last, turning away with infinite reluctance and with a movement as graceful as that of a fawn, or of a *première danseuse* about to rest; 'I will keep it in mind. You are sure the management can afford the reduction?'

Having made this rather airy comment, it seemed to Philip impolite, if not impossible, to ask the price of a 'job line' of mock goatskin cigarette-cases that were piled up in dreary disorder on a tray near at hand. So he passed out into the next Department, which happened to be that devoted to goods described as 'fancy', though, so far as he could see, not very aptly.

Still he glanced around him as he hurried on, his heart bleeding for the unfortunates, old and helpless, or young and defenceless, doomed some day to welcome these exacerbating barbarous jocosities as gifts. But at sight of an obscure, puffy, maroon object demonstratively labelled 'Pochette: Art Nouveau', his very skin contracted, and he was all but about to inquire of a large veiled old lady with an ebony walking-stick who was manfully pushing her way through this *mélange*, possibly in search of a *prie-dieu*, how such dreadful phenomena were 'begot, how nourished', and was himself preparing to join in the chorus, when a little beyond it his glance alighted on a minute writing-case, so frailly finished, so useless, so delicious to look at, handle, and smell, that even Titania herself might have paused to admire it.

Philip eyed it with unconcealed gusto. His features had melted into the smile that so often used to visit them when as a little boy he dad confided in his Uncle Charles that he preferred éclairs to doughnuts. Its price, he thought, was ridiculously moderate: only £67 10*s*.

'It's the décor, sir—Parisian, of course—that makes it a trifle costly,' the assistant was explaining. 'But it's practical as well as sheek and would add distinction to *any* young lady's boudoir, bedchamber, or lap. The ink, as you see, sir, cannot possibly leak from the bottle, if the case, that is, is held the right way up—so. The pencil, the "*Sans Merci*", as you observe, is of solid gold; and the pen, though we cannot guarantee the nib, is set with life-size turquoises. The flaps will hold at least six sheets of small size notepaper, and envelopes to—or not to—match. And *here* is a little something, a sort of calendar, sir, by which you can tell the day of the week of any day of the month in any year in any century from one A.D. to nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine. It could then be renewed.'

'M'm, very ingenious,' Philip murmured, 'and even Leap Year, I see. Is it unique, and so on?'

'No doubt of it, sir. As a matter of fact a lady from Philadelphia—the United States of America, sir—ordered fifty facsillimies, platinum mounts, of this very article—only yesterday afternoon; they get married a good deal over there, sir; wedding presents.'

'Quite, thank you, no,' said Philip, firmly but pleasantly. 'They say there is safety in numbers, but there seems to be precious little else. Have you anything less reproducible?'

'Reproducible, sir? Why, naturally, sir. You see this is only a counter article. While catering for the many,

sir, we are bound to keep an eye upon the few. For that very reason, the management prefer to have the costlier specimens under cover.'

'Again, thank you,' said Philip hurriedly. 'What evils are done in thy name, O Philadelphia! I may return later.'

He emerged from the Fancy Goods Department, feeling at the same moment crestfallen and curiously elated. His mind, in fact, at this moment resembled a volcano the instant before its gloom is fated to burst into a blazing eruption. Though very hazily, he even recognized the danger he was in. So in hope to compose himself he sat down for a minute or two on a Madeira wicker chair intended perhaps by the management for this very purpose, and found himself gazing at a large black Chinese cat, in the glossiest of glazed earthenware, and as life-like as Oriental artifice could make it. It was seated in a corner under a high potted palm, and it wore a grin upon its features that may have come from Cheshire, but which showed no symptom whatever of vanishing away. At sight of it—for Philip was not only partial to cats but knew the virtues of the black variety—a secret fibre seemed to have snapped in his head. 'Good luck!' the creature smirked at him. And Philip smirked back. A flame of anguished defiance and desire had leapt up in his body. He would show his uncle what was what. He would learn him to cut nephews off with shillings. He would dare and do and die!

He rose, refreshed and renewed. It was as if he had tossed off a bumper of 'Veuve Clicquot' of 1066. He must himself have come over with the Conqueror. A shopwalker lurking near was interrupted in the middle of an enormous gape by the spectacle of this Apollonian young figure now entering his department—Pianofortes

and American Organs. There was something in the leopard-like look of him, something so princely and predatory in his tread, that this Mr. Jackson would have been almost ready to confess that he was moved. Frenchily dark and Frenchily sleek, he bowed himself almost double.

'Yes, sir?' he remarked out loud.

'I want, I think, a pianoforte,' said Philip. 'A Grand.'

'Thank you, sir; this way, please. Grand pianofortes, Mr. Smithers.'

'I want a Grand piano,' repeated Philip to Mr. Smithers, an assistant with a slight cast in his left eye and an ample gingerish moustache. But in spite of these little handicaps Philip liked him much better than Mr. Jackson. A far-away glimpse of Mrs. Smithers and of all the little Smitherses seated round their Sunday leg of mutton at Hackney or at Brondesbury, may be, had flashed into his mind.

'Grands, sir,' cried Mr. Smithers, moving his moustache up and down with a curious rotary constriction of the lips; 'this way, please.'

The young man was conducted along serried ranks of Grands. They stood on their three legs, their jaws tight shut, as mute as troops on parade. Philip paced on and on, feeling very much like the late Duke of Cambridge reviewing a regiment of his Guards. He paused at length in front of a 'Style 8; 7 ft. 9 in., square-legged, black-wood, mahogany-trimmed Bismarck.'

'It *looks* spacious,' he smiled amiably. 'But the finish! And why overhung?'

'Overstrung, sir?' said Mr. Smithers. 'That's merely a manner of speaking, sir, relating solely to its inside. But this, of course, is not what we specificate as a *grand*

Grand. For tone and timber and resonance and pedal work and solidity and *wear*—there isn't a better on the market. I mean on the rest of the market. And if you were having in mind an everlasting instrument for the nursery or for a practice room—and we supply the new padded partitioning—this would be precisely the instrument, sir, you were having in mind. The young are sometimes a little hard on pianofortes, sir. They mean well, but they are but children after all; and——'

'Now let—me—think,' Philip interposed. 'To be quite candid, I wasn't having anything of that sort in mind. My sentiments are England for the English; and Bismarck, you know, though in girth and so on a remarkable man, was in other respects, a little—well, miscellaneous. It is said that he mixed his champagne with stout—or was it cocoa? On the other hand, I have no wish to be insular, and I *may* order one of these constructions later—for a lady: the niece, as a matter of fact, of a governess of my uncle Colonel Crompton Pim's when he was young—as young at least as it was possible for him to be—who is, I believe, thinking of taking—of taking in—pupils. But we will see to that later. Have you anything that I could really look at?'

Mr. Smithers's moustaches twirled like a weathercock. 'Why, yes, sir. Just now we are up to our eyes in pianos—flooded; and if I may venture to say so, sir, Bismarck was never no friend of *mine*. All this,' and he swept his thumb in the direction of the avenue of instruments that stretched behind them, 'they may be Grands, but they're most of them foreign, and if you want a little something as nice to listen to as it is natty to look at, and *not* a mere menadjery fit only for an 'awl, there is a little what they call a harpsichord over yonder, sir. It's a bijou model, de Pompadour case, hand-painted throughout—cupids

and scallops and what not, all English gut, wire, metal, and jacks, and I defy any dealer in London to approximate it, sir, in what you might call pure form. No noise and all music, sir, and that *mellow* you scarcely know where to look. A lady's instrument—a titled lady's. And only seven hundred and seventy-seven guineas, sir, all told.'

'Is it unique?' Philip inquired.

'Unique, sir? There's not another like it in Europe.'

Philip smiled at Mr. Smithers very kindly out of his blue eyes. 'But what about America?' he said.

The assistant curved what seemed an almost unnecessarily large hand round his lips. 'Between you and me, sir, if by America', he murmured, 'you're meaning the United States, why, Messrs. Montferas & de Beauguyou refuse to ship in that direction. It ruins their tone. In fact, sir, they are what's called *difficult*. They make for nobody and nowhere but as a favour; and that instrument over there was built for——!'

He whispered the sesame so low that water rustling on a pebbled beach would have conveyed to Philip tidings more intelligible. But by the look in Mr. Smithers's eye Philip guessed that the lady in question moved in a lofty, though possibly a narrow, circle.

'Ah!' he said; 'then that settles it. A home away from home. Charity begins there. I shall want it to-morrow. I shall want them both to-morrow. I mean the pianos. And perhaps a more democratic instrument for the servants' hall. But I will leave that to you.'

Mr. Smithers pretended not to goggle. 'Why, yes, sir, that can be easily arranged. In London, I *ho*—conjecture?'

'In London,' said Philip, 'Grosvenor Square.' For at

that very instant, as if at the summons of a jinnee, there had wafted itself into his memory the image of a vacant and 'highly desirable residence', which his casual eye had glanced upon only the afternoon before, and which had proclaimed itself 'to be let.'

'Grosvenor Square, sir; oh yes, sir?' Mr. Smithers was ejaculating, order-book in hand. 'I will arrange for their removal at once. The three of them—quite a nice little set, sir.'

'Pim, Crompton, Colonel,' chanted Philip. 'R-*O*-M; deferred account; *thank* you. 4-4-4, yes, four hundred and forty-four, Grosvenor Square. I am—that is, *we* are furnishing there.'

But his gentle emphasis on the 'we' was so courtly in effect that it sounded more like an afterthought than a piece of information. Nevertheless it misled Mr. Smithers. Intense fellow-feeling beamed from under his slightly overhung forehead. 'And I am sure, sir, if I may make so bold, I wish you both every happiness. I am myself of a matrimonial turn. And regret it, sir? *never*! I always say if every——'

'That's very kind indeed of you,' said Philip, averting his young cheek, which having flushed had now turned a little pale. 'And, if *I* may be so bold, I am perfectly certain Mrs. Smithers is of the same way of thinking. Which is the best way to the Best Man's Department, if I take in Portmanteaux and the Fancies on my way?'

Mr. Smithers eyed him with the sublimest admiration. 'Straight through, sir, on the left beyond them Chappels. On the same floor, but right out on the farther side of the building. As far as you can go.'

'That is exactly what I was beginning to wonder—precisely how far I can go. This little venture of mine is a rather novel experience, and at the moment I am un-

certain of its issue. But tell me, why is it our enterprising American friends have not yet invented a *lateral* lift?'

'Now that's passing strange, too, sir; for I've often fancied it myself,' said Mr. Smithers. 'But you see in a department like this there's not much time for quiet thought, sir, with so much what you might call hidden din about. As a matter of fact, when I was younger, sir —and that happens to us all—I did invent a harmonium key-stifler—rubber, and pith, and wool—*so*—and a small steel spring, quite neat and entirely unnoticeable. But the manufacturers wouldn't look at it; not they!'

'I don't believe', said Philip, folding up his bill, 'they ever look at anything. Not closely, you know. But if ever I do buy a harmonium,' he put his head a little on one side and again smiled at Mr. Smithers, 'I shall insist on the stifler. I suppose', he added reflectively, 'you haven't by any chance a nice pedigree Amati or Stradivarius in stock? I have a little weakness for fiddles.'

Mr. Smithers, leaning heavily on the counter on both his thumbs, smiled, but at the same time almost imperceptibly shook his head.

'I fancied it was unlikely,' said Philip. 'What's that over there; in the glass case, I mean?'

'That, sir?' said Mr. Smithers, twinkling up, 'in that glass case there? That's a harp, sir. And a lovely little piece *that* is. Child's size, sir. What they call minnychoore, and well over a century old, but still as sweet as a canary. It was made, so they say, for Mozart, the composer, sir, as you might be aware, in 1781, and up in the top corner is scratched the letters A. W. No doubt of it, sir—A. W. I've seen a picture of the mite myself playing like an angel in his nightcap, and not a day over seven; you'd hardly believe it, and his parents coming

in at the door. Surprising. Then Schumann, *he* had it, sir—I mean the harp; and Schumann, though I don't know how he could dissuade himself to part with it, *he* passed it on to Brahms, another composer—and very much thought of even though a bit nearer *our* day. But you'll find it all neatly set out on the brass label at the foot. It's all there, sir. There's many a custo——'

'Indeed!' said Philip; 'Brahms, Schumann, Mozart, what scenes we are recalling! And here it rests at last. The knacker's yard. How very, very sad. Why, of course, Mr. Smithers, we must have that sent on too—and packed very, very carefully. Is the glass case extra?'

Mr. Smithers gulped. 'I am exceedingly sorry, sir,' he said, 'exceedingly sorry, but it's not for sale; I mean —*except* the case.'

'Not for sale,' retorted Philip impulsively. 'But what is the use, Mr. Smithers, of a mercenary institution like this unless everything in it is for sale? You cannot mean for raw advertisement?'

Mr. Smithers was covered with confusion. 'I am sure, sir,' he said, 'that the directors would do their utmost to consider your wishes. They would be very happy to do so. But if you will excuse my mentioning it, I should myself very much miss that harp. I have been in this department thirteen years now.... My little boy.... It is the only thing . . .'

It was Philip's turn to be all in confusion. 'Good gracious me, I quite understand,' he said; 'not another word, Mr. Smithers. I wouldn't *think* of pressing the point. None the less I can assure you that even if it *had* been for sale I should always have welcomed you whenever you cared to come to Grosvenor Square and take another look at it. And, of course, your little boy too—*all* your little boys.'

Mr. Smithers appeared to be lost in gratitude. 'If only', he began, a light that never was on sea or land in his eye—but words failed him.

At the other end of the 'Chappels' Philip again encountered the walker, Mr. Jackson, still looking as much like a self-possessed bridegroom as it is possible for a high collar and a barber to achieve.

'I see', said Philip, 'you exhibit specimens of the tuberphone (and, by the way, I would suggest *a* instead of "er"), the tubaphone, the clog-box, and the Bombaboo, iniquities at the same time negroid and old-fashioned, but though in a recent visit to Budapest I found even the charming little linden-shaded shops—along the Uffelgang, you know, not, of course, a fashionable part of the city—crammed with models of the "Haba-Stein", a microtonic instrument with five keyboards and Hindu effects, intended, of course, for the polytonal decompositions of the "Nothing-but-Music" school—*most* interesting; I see *no* trace of it here. I am not a neoteromaniac, but still, we must keep abreast, we must keep abreast!'

He waved a not unfriendly glove over his head, smiled and went on.

Mr. Smithers had also watched the slim grey young figure until it had turned the corner and was out of sight. He then had a word with his 'floor chief'.

'Pim, eh, Crompton,' said Mr. Jackson, squinting morosely at his underling's open order-book. ' "Setting up house"? Then I suppose the old gent must have sent in his checks. Not that I'm surprised this nephew of his hasn't bought his black yet. Close-fisted, purple-nosed, peppery old——! There won't be many to cry their eyes out over *his* arums and gardenias.'

Mr. Smithers, being a family man, felt obliged to

seem to enjoy as much as possible his immediate chief's society.

'All I can say *is*,' he ventured, 'that young feller, and he's a gentleman if ever there was one, is making it fly.'

He *was*. At this moment Philip was assuring Assistant No. 6 in the Portmanteau Department that unless the Maharaja of Jolhopollolulí's dressing-case could be despatched next day to reach No. 444 Grosvenor Square by tea-time he need not trouble. 'A few other little things', he explained, 'are being sent at the same time.' No. 6 at once hastened to the house telephone and asked for the secretary's office. The line was engaged.

But he need not have hesitated, for when a young man with a Pim for an uncle and of so much suavity and resource makes his wishes known, this world is amiability itself. Philip was warming up. However bland in outward appearance, he was by this time at a very enlivening temperature. He had tasted blood, as the saying goes; and he was beginning to see the need of setting a good example. Customers, like the coneys, are usually a feeble folk. His little sortie was turning into a crusade.

By this time he had all but finished disporting himself in the Furniture Department. 'Three large drawing-rooms, one of them extensive,' had run his rather naked catalogue, 'a ballroom, a dining-room, a breakfast-room, and a little pretty dumpy all-kinds-of-angles morning-room with a Cherubini ceiling and a Venetian chimney-piece, eighteenth century, in lapis lazuli and glass. Bedrooms, let me see, say, twenty-two—just to go on with (but not in), eleven of them for personal use, and the rest, staff. That, I think, will do for the present. We face east or west as the case may be; and nothing, please, of the "decorative", the quaint, or the latest thing out. Nothing shoddy, shapeless, or sham. I dislike the stuffy

and the fussy and mere trimmings; and let the beds be *beds*. Moreover, I confess to being sadly disappointed in the old, the "antique", furniture you have shown me. The choice is restricted, naïve and incongruous, and I have looked in vain for anything that could not be easily rivalled in the richer museums. However, let there be as many so-called antique pieces as possible, and those as antique as you can manage. Period, origin, design, harmony—please bear these in mind.'

The assistants, clustering round him, bowed.

'If I have time I will look through the Department again on my way down. Eight hundred guineas for the cheaper of the Chippendale four-posters seems a little exorbitant; and three hundred and fifty for the William and Mary wall-glass—I fear it's been resilvered and patched. Still, I agree you can but do your best—I say you can all of you but do your best—and I must put up with that. What I *must* insist on, however, is that everything I have mentioned—everything—must be in its place to-morrow afternoon—carpets and so on will, of course, precede them—by four o'clock. And let there be no trace left of that indescribable odour of straw and wrappings—from Delhi, I should think—which accompanies removals. 444 Grosvenor Square. Pim—Crompton—Colonel: R-*O*-M. Thank you. To the left? *Thank* you.'

This 'floor-chief' hastened on in front of his visitor as if he were a Gehazi in attendance on a Naaman, and the young man presently found himself in a scene overwhelmingly rich with the colours, if not the perfumes, of the Orient. Here a complete quarter of an hour slid blissfully by. Mere wooden furniture, even when adorned with gilt, lacquer, ivory, or alabaster, can be disposed of with moderate ease; and especially if the stock of the

tolerable is quickly exhausted. But Persian, Chinese, if not Turkey, carpets are another matter.

Philip sat erect on a gimcrack gilded chair, his cane and hat in his left hand, his gloves in his right, while no less than three sturdy attendants in baize aprons at one and the same moment strewed their matchless offerings at his feet, and an infuriated and rapidly multiplying group of would-be customers in search of floorcloth, lino, and coco-nut matting stood fuming beyond. But first come first served is a good old maxim, and even apart from it Philip was unaware of their company. He lifted not so much as an eyebrow in their direction.

In the meantime, however, the cash balance in his uncle's bank, and much else besides, had long since as rapidly vanished as the vapour from a locomotive on a hot summer's day. From the Carpet Department, vexed that time allowed him only one of London's chief treasuries to ransack—such are the glories of Bokhara and Ispahan—he hastened down to the wine counters. Here, childishly confident in the cellarage of No. 444, Philip indulged a pretty palate *not* inherited from his uncle: claret, Burgundy, hock, sherry, cherry brandy, green Chartreuse, and similar delicate aids to good talk and reflection. He was ingenuous but enthusiastic. Port he ignored.

From 'Wines' he made his way through the galleries exhibiting curtains and 'hangings' (he shuddered), and china and glass—'most discouraging'. His spirits revived a little when yet another defunct and barbaric prince, this time from Abyssinia, supplied him in the Car Department with a vehicle whose only adequate use, to judge from the modesty of its dashboard, the simplicity of its engine and its price, would be a journey from this world into the next. Nevertheless His Highness had left it behind.

Fleeting visits to counters bristling with ironmongery, turnery, kitchen utensils, and provisions—and from motives of principle he omitted all mention of mulligatawny paste, chutney, West India pickles, and similar fierce and barbarous comestibles, vanished out of memory like the patterns of a kaleidoscope. The rather noisy annexe reserved for live stock Philip left unvisited. After deserts of dead stock it sounded inviting, but Philip's was a dainty nose and he was sorry for orang-outangs.

So too with books. He had clear convictions of what a gentleman's library should be without, but decided that it would take more leisure than he could spare this morning to expound them. Even the sight of a Work of Reference, however, is an excellent sedative; he ordered the choicest of who's-whos, dictionaries, atlases, encyclopaedias, bird, flower, and cookery books—with a copy of 'Bradshaw'—and retired.

As for pictures and statuary, one anguished glance into the dreadful chambers devoted to the fine arts had sent him scurrying on like a March hare. Nor, as he rather sadly realized, had he any cause to linger at the portals of the Monumental Masonry Department, and he now suddenly found himself in the midst of a coruscating blaze of the precious metals and the still more precious stones. He had strayed into 'Jewellery'—a feast for Aladdin. Gold in particular—goblets and bowls and tankards, plates, platters, and dishes of it; clocks, chronometers, watches—from massive turnips, memorial of the Georges, to midgets like a threepenny piece in crystal and enamel, many of them buzzing like bees, and all of them intent on the kind of time which is *not* wild or always nectarous, but of which Philip had always supposed there was an inexhaustible supply. But not, alas, for all

purposes. Indeed, these officious reminders of the actual hour had for the first time a little scared him.

In the peculiar atmosphere that hangs over any abundant array of sago, cooked meats, candles, biscuits, coffee, tea, ginger, and similar wares, he had been merely a young bachelor on the brink of an establishment. But at sight of this otiose display of gewgaws in the lamplit mansion in which he now found himself, his fancy had suddenly provided him with a bride. She was of a fairness incomparably fair. The first faint hint of this eventuality had almost unnerved him. He lost his head and—his heart being unconcerned—his taste also. In tones as languid as the breezes of Arabia he had at once ordered her rings, bracelets, necklaces, pendants, brooches, earrings, not to speak of bediamonded plumes and tiaras, that would daunt the dreams even of the complete bevy of musical comedy young ladies on the British stage—not to mention that of Buenos Aires. And then, oddly enough, he had come to himself, and paused.

At the very moment of opening his mouth in repetition of a solo with which he was now entirely familiar—'R-*O*-M', and so on—he sat instead, gaping at the tall, calm, bald, venerable old gentleman on the other side of the counter. He had flushed.

'Have you,' he inquired almost timidly at last, his eyes fixed on a chastely printed list of cutlery and silver ware that lay on the glass case at his elbow, 'have you just one really simple, lovely, rare, precious, and, well, unique little trinket suitable for a lady? Young, you know? An *un*-birthday present?'

The old gentleman looked up, looked at, looked *in*, smiled fondly, reminiscently, and, selecting a minute key on a ring which he had drawn out of his pocket, opened a safe not half a dozen yards away. 'We have this,' he said.

'This', at first, was a little fat morocco leather case. He pressed the spring. Its lid flew open. And for an instant Philip's eyesight failed him. But it was not so much the suppressed lustre of the jewels within that had dazed his imagination as the delicate marvel of their setting. They lay like lambent dewdrops on the petals of a flower. The old gentleman gazed too.

'The meaning of the word "simple"', he suggested ruminatively, 'is one of many degrees. This, sir, is a Benvenuto Cellini piece.' He had almost whispered the last few syllables as if what in workmanship were past all rivalry was also beyond any mortal pocket; as if, in fact, he were telling secrets of the unattainable. The tone piqued Philip a little.

'It is charming,' he said. 'But have you nothing then of Jacques de la Tocqueville's, or of Rudolph von Himmeldommer's, nothing of—dear me, the name escapes me. The earlier Florentine, you will remember, no doubt referred to in *Sordello*, who designed the chryselephantine bowl for the Botticelli wedding-feast. But never mind. Nothing Greek? Nothing Etruscan—*poudre d'or*? Are you suggesting that the Winter Palace was thrice looted in vain?'

The old gentleman was accustomed to the airs and graces of fastidious clients and merely smiled. He had not been listening very intently. 'You will appreciate the difficulty, sir, of keeping anything but our more trifling pieces actually within reach of the nearest burglar with a stick of gun-cotton or an acetylene lamp. This'—he stirred the little leather case with his finger as lightly as a cat the relics of a mouse, and its contents seemed softly to sizzle in subdued flames of rose and amber and blue—'this', he said, 'happens not to be our property. It is merely in our keeping. And though to an article of

such a nature it is absurd to put a price, we have been asked to dispose of it; and by—well, a client for whom we have the profoundest respect.'

'I see;' Philip pondered coldly on the bauble, though his heart was a whirlpool of desire and admiration. He swallowed. The remote tiny piping of a bird that was neither nightingale nor skylark, and yet might be either or both, had called to him as if from the shores of some paradisal isle hidden in the mists of the future. He glanced up at the old gentleman, but his bald, long, grey countenance was as impassive as ever.

'I'll take it,' Philip said, and for a while could say no more. When speech was restored to him, he asked that it should be delivered not 'with the other things', and not to any butler or major-domo or other crustacean that might appear in answer to a knock at No. 444, but by special messenger into his own personal private hands.

'Precisely, at half-past four, if you please.' The old gentleman bowed. As there was not enough room in the money column of his order-book for the noughts, he had written in the price in longhand, and was engaged in printing the figures 444 in the place reserved for the customer's address, when a small but clearly actual little voice at Philip's elbow suddenly shrilled up into his ear——'Mr. Philip Pim, sir?' At echo of this summons Philip stood stock-still and stiff, his heart in his ears. 'The sekkertary, sir,' the piping voice piped on, 'asks me to say he'd be much obliged if you would be so kind as to step along into his office on your way *hout*, sir.'

The tone of this invitation, though a little Cockney in effect, was innocence and courtesy itself; yet at sound of it every drop of blood in Philip's body—though he was by no means a bloated creature—had instantly congealed. This was the end, then. His orgy was over. His morn-

ing of mornings was done. The afflatus that had wafted him on from floor to floor had wisped out of his mind like the smoke of a snuffed-out candle. Yet *still* the bright thought shook him: he had had a Run for his money. No—better than that: he had had a Run *gratis*.

He must collect his wits: they had gone woolgathering. At last he managed to turn his head and look down at the small, apple-cheeked, maroon-tunicked page-boy at his side—apple-cheeked, alas, only because he had but that week entered the sekkertary's service and his parents were of country stock.

'Tell Sir Leopold Bull'—Philip smiled at the infant—'that I will endeavour to be with him in the course of the afternoon. Thank you. That,' he added for the ear of his friend on the other side of the counter, 'that will be all.'

But Philip was reluctant to leave him. These four syllables, as he had heard himself uttering them, sounded on in his ear with the finality of a knell. He was extremely dubious of what would happen if he let go of the counter. His knees shook under him. A dizzy vacancy enveloped him in. With a faint wan smile at the old gentleman, who was too busily engaged in returning his treasures to the safe to notice it, he managed to edge away at last.

Every mortal thing around him, gilded ceiling to grandfather clock, was at this moment swaying and rotating, as will the ocean in the eyes of a sea-sick traveller gloating down upon it from an upper deck. He felt ill with foreboding.

But breeding tells. And courage is a mistress that has never been known to jilt a faithful heart. Philip was reminded of this as he suddenly caught sight of a sort of enormous purple beefeater, resembling in stature a Prussian dragoon, and in appearance a Javanese Jimjam. This

figure stood on duty in the doorway, and appeared to be examining him as closely as if he were the heir to the English throne (or the most nefarious crook from Chicago). As Philip drew near he looked this monster full in his fish-like eye, since he was unable to do anything else. But try as he might he couldn't pass him in silence.

'Ask Sir Leopold Bull, please,' he said, 'to send an official to show me the way to his office. He will find me somewhere in the building.'

'I can take you there meself,' replied the giant hoarsely. He could indeed—bodily.

'Thank you,' replied Philip. 'I have no doubt of it. But I should be much obliged if you would at once deliver my message.'

He then groped his way to yet another wicker chair not many yards along a corridor festooned with knick-knacks from Japan and the Near East, and clearly intended for speedy disposal. He eyed them with immense distaste and sat down.

'Nothing whatever, thank you,' he murmured to a waitress who had approached him with a card containing a list of soft drinks. Never in his life had he so signally realized the joys of self-restraint. And though at the same moment he thrust finger and thumb into his waistcoat pocket in search of his Uncle Charles's last sovereign, it was with a view not to material but to moral support. Years before he had often tried the same device when as a small boy deadly afraid of the dark he had managed at last to thrust his fevered head up and out from under his bedclothes, and to emit a dreadful simulacrum of a croupy cough. He had never known it to fail of effect, and it was always nice to know his mother was *there*.

So, too, with his Uncle Charles's sovereign. It was

nice to know it was there, though it was not the dark Philip was now afraid of but the light. Resting the ivory handle of his walking-stick on his lower lip, he began to think. What would his sentence be? A first offender, but not exactly a novice. Not, at any rate, he hoped, in taste and judgment. Months or years? Hard labour or penal servitude? So swift is the imagination that in a few seconds Philip found himself not only—his sentence served, the smiling governor bidden farewell—*out* and a free man again, but fuming with rage that he had not managed to retain a single specimen of his spoils. The Jobbli dressing-bag, for instance, or that tiny, that utterly and inimitably 'unique' little Sheraton Sheridan writing-desk.

He came back a little stronger from this expedition into the future. For reassurance, like hope, springs eternal in the human breast. His one regret was not so much that he had been found out (that might come later), but that he had been found out so soon. How much bolder, less humiliating, nobler, to have actually bearded that old curmudgeon of an uncle of his, swapp or bogey in hand, in his den!

That in any event he would have been 'found out' on the morrow, as soon, that is, as the first van arrived at No. 444, he had realized long ago. He certainly would not have been found 'in'! But even one brief night in May seems, in prospect, a long interval between being a Croesus and a felon in Pentonville.

He was recalled from these reflections by a young man whose sleek black hair was parted as neatly in front and in the middle as his morning coat was parted behind. A few paces distant, like a mass of gilded pudding-stone, stood the giant from the Jewellery Department. Were they in collusion? Philip could not decide.

'If you would step this way, sir, to the secretary's office,' said the young man, 'Sir Leopold Bull would be very much obliged.'

Philip mounted to his feet and, though he flatly refused to step *that* way, followed him—to his doom. That however, was not to be instantaneous, for on his arrival Sir Leopold Bull, rising from his roll-top desk with a brief but thrilling smile, first proffered a plump white hand to his visitor and then a chair. It seemed to be a needlessly polite preamble to the interview that was to follow. Philip ignored the hand but took the chair.

'Thank you,' he said. 'I do hope you will some day take my advice, Sir Leopold, to *sim*plify the arrangement of this building. It is a perfect labyrinth, and I always miss my way.' With a sigh he sank down into the cushions. He was tired.

'My uncle, Colonel Crompton Pim,' he continued, 'is unable to spare a moment to see you this morning. I regret to say he strongly disapproved of the Bombay ducks, or was it the Clam Chowder, you sent him on Friday. They were beneath contempt.'

Sir Leopold smiled once more, but even more placatingly. 'I had the privilege of seeing Colonel Crompton Pim only yesterday afternoon,' he replied. 'He then expressed his satisfaction, for the time being, at the golf balls—the new *Excelsior* brand—with one of which we had the pleasure of supplying him *gratis* a week or two ago. The Bombay ducks shall be withdrawn immediately. I must apologize for not seeking you out in person, Mr. Pim, but what I have to say is somewhat of a private nature, and——'

'Yes,' said Philip, realizing how thin was the end of the wedge which Sir Leopold was at this moment insinuating into the matter in hand. 'Yes, quite.' And he

opened his innocent blue eyes as wide as he could, to prevent them from blinking. He kept them fixed, too, on the close-shaven face, its octopus-like mouth and prominent eyes, with ill-suppressed repulsion. To be a fly that had fallen a victim to such a spider as this!

'It would please me better', he went on, 'if you would arrive as rapidly as possible at the matter you wish to discuss with me, I am free for five minutes, but I must beg you not to waste our time. And please tell your porter over there to go away. Scenes are distasteful to me.'

The face of the porter, who seemed to have been created solely for his bulk, turned as crimson as a specimen of *sang-du-bœuf*. He appeared to be hurt at having been described as a 'scene'. But wages are of more importance than feelings, and he withdrew.

'You have had a busy morning, Mr. Pim,' said the secretary. 'No less than seven of my assistants who have had the privilege of waiting upon you have been monopolizing me for some time with telephone messages. I hope I am not being too intrusive if I venture to congratulate you, sir, on what I suppose to be Colonel Crompton Pim's approaching——'

'Candidly, Sir Leopold,' said Philip firmly, 'that *would* be venturing too far. Much too far. Let us say no more about it. What precise charge are you intending to bring against me?'

There was a pause while the world continued to rotate.

'For which article?' breathed Sir Leopold.

Philip gazed steadily at the full, bland, secretive countenance. It was as if once again he had heard that seraphic bird-like voice sounding in the remote blue sky above the storm-clouds that now hung so heavily over his beating heart.

'Oh, I mean for delivery,' he said. 'Mine was—was a large order.'

'But, my dear sir, we shouldn't dream of making *any* such charge. *Any* service to Colonel Pim . . .' The faint sob in the voice would have done credit to Caruso.

Philip stooped to hide the cataract of relief that had swept over his face, then raised his head again. How could he be sure that this was anything more than play-acting—the torture of suspense? 'Ah, well,' he said, 'that is no matter now. I gather there was some other point you had in mind—in *view*, I should say.'

'Oh, only', said Sir Leopold, 'to ask if Colonel Pim would be so kind as to subscribe as usual to our Fund for the Amelioration of the Conditions of the Offspring of Superannuated Shop Assistants. Mainly orphans, Mr. Pim. We must all die, Mr. Pim, and some of us have to die earlier in life than others. Still, our average here is little worse than that of any other large London establishment. In Petrograd—or was it Los Angeles?—I am given to understand, a shop assistant at two-and-thirty is a shop assistant with at least one foot in the grave. It is the little orphans, the fatherless ones, who from no apparent fault of their own, have to be left to the tender mercies of a busy world! It would grieve you, sir, which Heaven forbid, if I told you how many of these wee small things there are now on our hands. Chubby, joysome, rosebud little creatures, as happy as the day is long. Nevertheless it is a little thoughtless to marry, Mr. Pim, when it is only orphans one can leave behind one. On the other hand, there is a silver lining to *every* cloud. Without these infants we should be deprived of a good cause. An excellent cause. And it's causes that keep us going. Last year I think Colonel Pim very kindly contributed half a guinea.'

'In cash?' Philip inquired sharply.

'We debited his account,' said Sir Leopold.

'Well, then', said Philip, 'please understand that my uncle *regrets* that little laxity. He has hardened. He now entirely disapproves of orphans and of orphanages. The shop assistant, he was saying to me only the other day, is a person who should be grateful to Providence that he has *no* justification for dabbling in matrimony. The more celibate they are, in his opinion, the better. But recollect, Sir Leopold, that until we arrive at the higher and fewer salaried officials in your establishment, I feel myself in no way bound to *share* my uncle's views. Your staff is as courteous and considerate as it appears to be unappreciated. A man's a man for a' that. And *a'* that. Let us talk of brighter things.'

Sir Leopold did his utmost to conceal the wound to his vanity. 'I am sorry to seem to be persistent,' he assured his client, 'but Colonel Pim only yesterday was so kind as to say he would *consider* my appeal. I take it, then, that he has changed his mind?'

'My uncle', retorted Philip tartly, 'has a mind that is the better for being changed.' For an instant he saw the face before him as it would appear in due course in the witness-box; and his very soul revolted. That pitiless Machine called Society might have its merits, but not *this* cog in its wheel! 'I myself implored my uncle', he added bitterly, 'to give the orphans the cold shoulder. What in the chronic sirocco of his next world would be the use to him of a mere half-guinea's worth of cooling breezes? Scarcely a sop in the pan. Indeed, only a passion for the conventional prevented him from asking for his previous donations to be returned.'

Sir Leopold appeared to be engaged in rapidly bolting something—possibly his pride. It was at any rate no

part of his secretarial duties to detect insanity in the family of any solvent shareholder.

'There is only one other little point,' he went on rather hollowly. 'Colonel Pim asked me to send him a detailed account of his purchases during the last month. We met by happy chance as he was yesterday alighting from a taxicab at the entrance to his bank. After to-day's purchases that will perhaps take an hour or two. But it shall reach him to-morrow morning—without fail.'

Philip had risen. It is better to stand when one is at bay. While with a gentle absent smile he stood drawing on his gloves he was faced with the wildest effort of his life—to make sure of what lay in hiding behind these last remarks. Anything *might*.

'Oh, he did—did he,' he remarked very softly. 'I fancy' —and at last he lifted his gentle eyes to meet his adversary's—'I *believe* there's an empty whisky jar that has not yet been credited to him. Perhaps that was on his mind.'

'Well, Mr. Pim,' said Sir Leopold, 'turning' at last, 'if *that's* his only jar it's soon adjusted.'

Philip took a deep breath. He playfully wagged a finger.

'Now *that*, Sir Leopold,' he said, 'was blank verse. I hope you don't intend to put my little purchases of this morning into *rhyme*! The effort, I assure you, would be wasted on my uncle.'

He wheeled lightly, and turned towards the door. Sir Leopold, his face now at liberty to resume its office of expressing his feelings, accompanied him. Indeed he continued to accompany him to the very entrance of his gigantic abode. And there Philip almost fainted. A deluge, compared with which that of Noah and his family was nothing but an April shower, was descending on the street.

'A taxi,' roared Sir Leopold at a group of his satellites in the porch, caparisoned in shiny waterproofs, and armed with gigantic *parapluies*.

But though at least nineteen of these vehicles were instantly battling their way towards this goal, Philip with incredible agility had eluded their attention. Before Sir Leopold had had time even to arrange his face to smile a farewell, our young friend had gone leaping up the staircase behind him, and had without a moment's pause vanished into the Tropical Department. One fugitive glance at its pith and pucka contents, and at the dusky assistants in attendance, had only accelerated his retreat. In less than half a minute he found himself confronting a young woman seated in the midst of a stockade of umbrellas.

The coincidence was too extreme to be ignored. He would at least carry off *some* little souvenir of his morning's outing. What better value could he get for hard cash than an implement that would be at the same time a refuge from the elements—for other he would soon presently have none—and a really formidable weapon at hand for his next interview with Sir Leopold?

He had but just enough breath left to express himself. He pointed.

'I *want* one, please,' he cried at the young woman. 'Cash.'

'One, two, three, four, *five* guineas?' she murmured, looking as if she were less in need of her stock than of her lunch. 'Partridge, malacca, horn, ivory, rhinoceros, natural, *gold*? Union, gloria, glacé, taffeta, cotton, mixture, or *twill*?'

'Not a toy; an umbrella,' Philip expostulated. 'To keep off rain. A nephew returning to school—ten years' wear. Gingham, alpaca, calico, cast-iron—*any-*

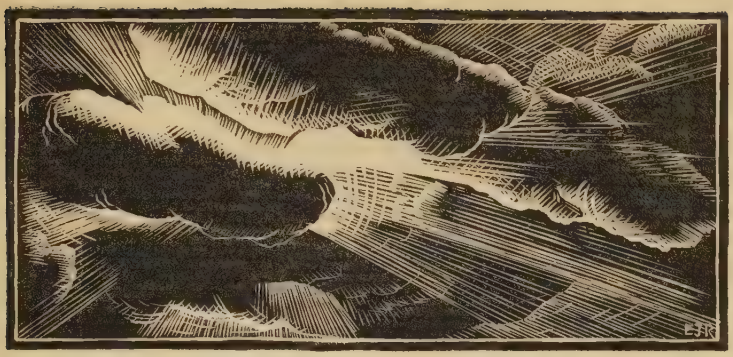
thing; so long as it is hefty, solid, endurable, awful, and *cheap*.'

'We have here what is *called* an umbrella,' replied the assistant a trifle coldly. 'The "Miss and Master Brand". Lignum-vitæ stick, whalebone ribs, blunted ferrule, non-poisonous handle, guaranteed not to break, fray, fade, or scale. Nine and elevenpence complete.'

'Bill; in haste; cash; just as it is; thanks,' cried Philip, and seized the dreadful object. With a groan he laid his Uncle Charles's sovereign in the narrow brass trough of the pay-desk. The obese young person in the wooden box seemed about to lift it to her lips, glanced at him again, put it aside, smiled, and gave him his change.

'The way to the back exit, I think, is over here?' Philip murmured, waving his gloves due west.

The young person smiled again, and he withdrew. He withdrew down the back steps and into the deluge: there to face a watery world, the possessor of ten shillings and a penny (in his pocket), a wardrobe of old suits, about a hundred and fifty books, three of them unmerited prizes for good conduct, a juvenile collection of postage stamps, a hypothetical legacy of a shilling, and an uncle who, if he faced his liabilities as an English gentleman should, had to all intents and purposes overdrawn his bank account that afternoon by, say roughly, a couple of hundred thousand pounds.



THE PICNIC

THERE was an empty, pensive look on Miss Curtis's face as she stood there, solitary, by the (as yet unblinded) shop-door, the finger and thumb of her small firm hand idly twisting the pencil stuck in between the two little black buttons of her black bodice. She was looking out through the glass of the door into the street, while Miss Mavor on the further side of the shop was drawing down the other blinds—a swoop and a swish to each, in turn. Miss Mavor did everything like that.

It was the first week of a hot September. The homeward stream of people in the street outside had long since begun to ebb. A late evening sky hung over London, painting with its faint colours the glassy windows of the houses opposite—right down, Miss Curtis noticed, to the top of the first floor. There the darker parts began. All quiet; all serene; and the close of another busy competent day.

With her set, square, capable face, its dark eyes in curious contrast to the pallor of the skin, she seemed to have fallen into a reverie. She herself with her neat handbag and her admirable umbrella would soon be returning to her lodgings. All lights out, she would open this door,

shut it, lock the padlock, give it a tug and, after one look to left and right just in case of 'suspicious characters', she would go off home. And anybody who happened to meet and look at her would know that she was a woman well able to take care of herself—or of anybody or anything else, for that matter.

Miss Curtis wasn't proud of it, but she knew she could be relied on. And so she had got on in the world, and was still getting on. You can never tell, indeed, into what comfortable port a capable head will not finally conduct you if softly and steadily you follow its nose. Miss Curtis's nose stood out straight and able. She would have made a formidable figurehead if, head and bust, she had been modelled in wood and dyed with woad and crimson for the purpose. But though, since she was now manageress of the 'establishment' and to that extent her own mistress, she could in most things have her own way, yet she was always the first to come, and to-night as on all other nights she would be the last to go. She just lived for her business; that's what it came to.

Silly pretty little Phyllis had left the shop at least an hour before. Miss Curtis had been reminded of her by the sight of yet another belated sylph-like young woman tripping along in her champagne stockings to her own particular tryst. The child had asked her for time off—and much too soon after the last occasion. But it is difficult to say No, even to a butterfly—when it happens to be in love. Miss Curtis had always believed in a firm hand, but not in *too* firm a hand. You must keep up appearances, and you must keep the rules—or discipline will suffer. But the rod of iron was not one of her fetishes, except in relation to herself.

Nobody was watching her now, the day was over, and for the moment she could let appearances take care of

themselves. So every sign of competence and efficiency had gradually drained out of her features as she went on looking out into the street. Her face had become gentle, almost demure. It now resembled, quite unknown to herself, the plush-framed photograph on her mantelpiece which had been taken of her as a fat little girl in a round hat. She had sunk into the deeps as much as that, and she almost wished this pensive coloured scene might go on for ever.

But it wouldn't. Life wasn't like that, though you *had* to stand aside sometimes and have a look at it, merely in order to keep on taking your part. Otherwise the less attention you gave it the better. It was hopeless to let it interfere with your—career. Still you had your melting moments—silly ones, too; even dangerous perhaps. Mere memories of them did no harm, though. They helped. They made even *really* silly people more intelligible—and there was scarcely a moment in Miss Curtis's day when there wasn't *some* silly person about. They also kept a firm hand flexible. Indeed there were little events in Miss Curtis's past—though very few of them—that would now and then intrude into her mind like shy exotic animals into a highly conventional park—as if positively on purpose to amuse her.

Perhaps the funniest of all, the most absurd and ridiculous, yet in some ways the easiest to recall without minding much—simply because it *was* so absurd, so meaningless—was that few days' holiday she had spent at the seaside, about five years ago. Some memories are like ghosts. So was this. Miss Curtis, at any rate, never knew when it was not going to reappear. And she was almost sure to find it in her company at this particular hour of this particular kind of day.

And here, as if to prove it, was that blind man again,

with his black goggles and his tin and his stick and his dog, tapping and groping along the darkening pavement outside. *He* never failed to call its cue. No marvel in that. Occasionally, if nobody was looking, Miss Curtis had slipped out to put a soundless penny into his tin, and he would lift his unshaven chin at her as if he still hoped he could take a look at so unexpected a patron through those awful lantern-like spectacles. Once, one summer evening, she had actually dropped a shilling into his tin. It wasn't sentiment; she knew he wasn't so much to be pitied as all that; but there are ways of letting *yourself* down, if you harden right off. But to-night—well, Miss Mavor was close upon her. 'There goes that old one-eyed humbug with the dog,' she was saying, and down came her last blind. 'I bet *he's* got some money in the bank.'

Miss Curtis watched him absently out of sight. She didn't reply; Miss Mavor said everything like that. As for the blind beggar's having money in the bank, so had Miss Curtis, and a good deal more than this time five years ago. That particular summer indeed she had not only been out of a job for a few weeks, but instead of at once looking for another she had taken a holiday and just blued some of her savings. In really nice apartments, too. But then of course Miss Curtis, at her age, was never in any doubt of a job when she wanted one. She wasn't exactly lucky; she was efficient. Yet heavens, what a fool she had been. What a *simpleton*!—and absolutely nothing to show for it, not even to herself when the lights were out, and she was alone!

Simply because she *was* so efficient, and looked so ungullible and was so completely trustworthy, it was almost a solace now to realize that she could ever have been quite so fantastically silly—idiotic. Still, with memories of that

kind silence is best. There are limits. Miss Curtis would no more have dreamed of sharing this old ghost with, say, Miss Mavor, than a crocus would dream of blossoming at the foot of the North Pole. And the funny thing was, it was partly because it hadn't been bad *enough*—looked at in cold blood. You can stand up to the really tragic and—and brazen things out. At least Miss Curtis supposed you could.

It had been at Newhampton—a nice quiet select little place. And it hadn't been in the horrible height of August either—the Newhampton 'season'—but at the end of May, when only the idle rich can afford to enjoy such resorts. She remembered it as clearly as if she had been reading about it the night before in a novel. For the matter of that she remembered even *what* novel she had been reading about an hour or two before she had set out that afternoon on her last solitary picnic—the picnic that had never come off. Oh dear me, how amusing! —with her broken thermos flask, her raspberry-jam sandwiches and her currant bun. After *that* little *contre-temps* she had sat alone under the sand-dunes, staring at the sea, or with her eyes tight shut—for three solid hours; and then at last by a long way round had come back, sandwiches and bun still uneaten, to her apartments.

Lying half in that first floor bedroom, in shadow, and half on its balcony, in the sun, she had spent the first part of that afternoon in a deck-chair—dressed ready to go out—the rather dingy-looking novel in her hand. By stooping forward a little and peeping round the brick corner of the balcony to the left she could see the placid English channel, steadfastly intent on its imitation of the colour of a baby's eyes. A tang of salt and sea-weed and stale fish was in the air, and that queer fizz of expectation which frequents all seaside places was in her mind.

'Mind!' Why your very inside gives a little happy jump every time even an idle boatman suggests a sail. She could even recall the exact look of the table at her midday meal—some dry cold tongue and stewed gooseberries and cream—though she hadn't eaten very much of either. That done, and cleared away, there she had lolled—yes, lolled—two cushions behind her head, her legs drawn up sideways under her, but very very carefully so that neither blouse nor tailor-made skirt should suffer from creases, while she continued to devour that precious novel. Simply to make the time go by. Not think of two things at once! What utter nonsense. Yet *what* a silly story it had been. Even Phyllis would have turned up her nose at such a 'fullyton' as that.

Indeed, what's more, Miss Curtis had never finished it, and now never would. She had even forgotten to return the book to the stuffy little circulating library that had seemed such a ravishing addition to Newhampton the day after she had arrived. That was the queerest thing of all, perhaps—why (when her own little affair—affair!—was over), a story so silly, so exaggerated, so *unreal* should have become positively nauseating in memory—almost as if it had been an extract from her own autobiography.

Hearts Aflame: that was the title. And its author had chosen for his hero a man positively made and designed for victories over the inflammable sex. Nothing very original in that, perhaps. He was always most beautifully dressed, either in plus fours or for the evening, and with one glance of his piercing blue eyes, with one befondlement, and with the iciest *sang-froid* he broke hearts wherever he went, never even turning aside to glance at the remains. And yet so far as Miss Curtis could see he never got the least bit of pleasure out of any heart in any

condition—green, ripe, or rotten. It was merely a habit. He was just a Don Juan. On the other hand he was a Don Juan who had made a slip—before the story opened. For an Italian Countess had somehow succeeded in marrying him in spite of his efforts (even then apparent), to practise the part of Henry VIII without incurring its responsibilities. Poor hysterical racked drugged creature, by Chapter XXIII she had long ago of course lost every shred of belief or faith in him. And yet she had continued to hope (though nothing the author could say persuaded Miss Curtis that the Countess had *really* hoped), he would some day turn over a new leaf—one, that is, that would not be merely tantamount to turning over a new lady-love. As if such men had any leaves to turn!

The frail little night-orbed Countess had had her wits about her too. She had remained an angler long after she had caught her fish—or rather had been caught by her fish. But in Chapter XXIV she had begun doing what Miss Curtis had often noticed ladies, especially titled ladies, often do in novels—she had decided to win back her husband by means of her charms. That was odd, too. The author kept on talking about the Countess's charms, but even Miss Curtis had felt bound to agree with her promiscuous husband that some of them weren't very conspicuous. They were at any rate hopelessly unpractical, and unlikely even, according to Miss Curtis's secondhand experience of such matters, to last out a honeymoon. Perhaps this was because she was so foreign. Whether or not, Miss Curtis couldn't have supposed that any one—even an Italian Countess, could be of her own sex and yet be so, well, shameless. In such a stupid way, too. She had positively *no* reserve. She said things to her husband even when she knew he didn't care that you couldn't possibly say to *any*body if you remem-

bered you were ever going to be alone again. She entreated him, she besought him—that was the word—to be 'kinder', to return to her, to remember all her sacrifices. 'Oh,' she would cry, grovelling at his feet, her sultry lambent eyes raining tears down her pale olive cheeks. 'Oh, how I love you! How I love you!' And then in the same breath those very same eyes would be snapping crackers at him, 'Oh, how I *hate* you! *How* I hate you!' Remarks like that, of course, are like holding the candle of your life in the middle and asking *any* Don Juan to burn it up at both ends.

And then had come Chapter XXV. In a desperate effort to retrieve her husband's affections the Countess had sent to Paris for the most seductive of new confections in ivory silk with jewels to match that Worth could supply—for she had still managed somehow to cling to the remnant of her pre-nuptial fortune. Miss Curtis had not cared much for the look of this 'model' as it appeared in print. Perhaps that was because the book had been written by a man. But how silly of him not to ask his wife or his sister or his mother or a female friend what *she* thought of it. Anyhow the Countess had sent for it, and it had come, and there it lay, in its original package where her maid had put it—on her own little bed in her own little bedroom. And the Night of Nights was still to come. Alas, when that night did come her husband, morally speaking, had put even himself beyond the pale —though what the Countess thought of it Miss Curtis was never to discover. Miss Curtis had got thus far and no further. The wretched man, that is, at his wits' end to convince his last lady of his good intentions—though lady was perhaps hardly the word to use for her—had given the milliner's box precisely as it stood and with all its contents—and without even seeing if they

would fit, *to* that last lady and—well, that was the end of it.

For at this point Miss Curtis had let the book fall back into her lap, had folded her hands on its open pages and —realizing that she must set off now if she was to set off at all—with a long-drawn shuddering sigh of relief, expectation, dread and sheer physical fatigue, all in one, had stared vacantly out at the houses on the other side of the street. She would read what came after in bed that night.

But she didn't read anything in bed that night. She had lain (though not for nearly so many hours as she had imagined next morning), staring into the dark, and every now and then softly laughing; and in a way in which she had never laughed since, and would never, if she could help it, laugh again.

For Miss Curtis in less than a week at Newhampton had fallen in love. She had fallen in love with a stranger sitting at a window at the other end of the esplanade. Not that she had ever confessed this in so many raw unrecallable words, even to herself. Not even at the time, when she had been at least five years younger. Five!—more like fifty. But one can know and never say; and if she had *not* been in love, why had the mere shadow of that homeward-bound, cadaverous blind man in the street made her feel slightly sick? And why, whenever the opportunity came, did she find herself staring like this out of the glass of the door into the darkening street if it were not something of a pleasure to feel a little sick like that?

Well, it didn't much matter now. She had long ago recovered her balance and could recall without a single pang every little incident that had followed the final putting aside of that utterly fatuous novel. Stories like that

were of course *known* as 'sensational'. But life! Why the mere packing up of her sandwiches and her bun, her little talk with her landlady as she filled her flask with tea, the last glance at herself in the painted looking-glass between the photographs and the texts over the chimney-piece in her landlady's sitting-room, the mere catching up of her gloves, as with a whisk of her tailor-made skirt she turned aside and with chin a little raised, bloused shoulders a little squared, she once more faced an experience which had become the very elixir of her existence—what did it all amount to but proof that writers of novels only dabble in tinctures while the essence for ever escapes them! You don't have to be a clay-coloured little Countess with Southern blood in your veins to find *that* out!

Miss Curtis had met her landlady again at the foot of the stairs, and had caught the far-away little cockcrow in her own heart at sight of the faded old eyes 'taking her in'. Probably they were no longer merely faded now—she had never seen the old woman since, had only written that once, and then no more. And yet the house must still be there, sunning itself in the marine breezes, and may be somebody else's card with APARTMENTS in silver letters in the sitting-room window. Things went on whatever your *idea* of them might be. She remembered even what her landlady had said—just a few words. She had told her to enjoy herself while she was young—as had Solomon the Wise in other terms, and had added: 'What's the seaside *for* but to lay, as you might say, in that direction?'

Mrs. Evan's seaside, as Miss Curtis had heard two or three times on the very evening of her arrival, had lain so little in that direction that only once during her long married and widowed life at Newhampton had she ven-

tured out to the end of the pier. And then she hadn't been able to see 'much in it what they fancy'. But you mustn't of course judge of good counsel by the counsellor. Miss Curtis had smiled at the old woman, with her head on one side, as though, if you want to look as nice as you possibly can, it is as well to practise doing so at every opportunity.

And mention had been made of an egg—a nice fresh egg for her supper; she remembered that too, though not the egg itself. 'There's always a nice fresh egg'—they were her landlady's very words, and Miss Curtis had replied with the utmost gaiety and aplomb that if there *weren't*, why, there wouldn't be any more chickens and therefore there wouldn't be any more eggs. And they had both of them laughed. As a matter of fact on that occasion it hadn't seemed to matter the least bit in the world whether or not she was ever going to eat anything again as long as she lived. But she had none the less assured the old woman she would adore an egg—'As *you* boil them, you know!'—and had then sallied out into the hot air down the sleepy street, and turned off towards the blue, bright, salty, sea-sweet esplanade.

There, she had paused. She had not only paused, but seated herself in one of the little glass and cast-iron shelters and gazed out at the far-away flurry of smoke of a small steamer that was steadily pushing its way round the extreme edge of the world, bound, like Miss Curtis, for some unknown port. And she had tried, and tried in vain, to take stock of herself.

Wasn't it really and truly worse than ridiculous, almost as silly as that black-eyed, painted-up, feather-witted little Italian Countess herself, and much, after all, in the same way, to be sitting there actually out of breath, almost *unable* to breathe, simply in expectation of seeing

a strange man? And him not in the open, mind, but seated at a balconied window similar to but rather more spacious than the one she had just left, and gazing, as she was now, out to sea? The crisis had come so suddenly too. One glimpse at that lonely face and shoulders and she was never, never to forget him, though she *was* to get over him, so to speak.

Like most things in life that seem to mean anything, it had all happened so instantly, so absolutely unforeseeably. Miss Curtis had been just walking as usual along by herself—off to the sand-dunes once more, and a little absent in mind—and without in the least knowing why, as she came to the flagstaff she had lifted her eyes and looked straight up across at him. And there he was—up there on the other side of the street as if he had been waiting for her for months. There was something extraordinarily gentlemanly in his appearance—gentlemanly in the real sense. This was one of the first things she had noticed afterwards when she was back in her rooms again. And though he had been smiling—smiling straight out across at her, it was impossible to have taken the least offence at such boldness. It wasn't boldness. It was as natural as a child who likes the look of a stranger—of any sex—and of course doesn't mind showing it. There wasn't in fact the least little symptom of the cheeky, of the fast, in that smile. It was quiet, and far-away; *lonely* —that was the word.

And taken at a disadvantage like this, Miss Curtis had only been able to gaze blankly back. She was perfectly certain of that. And then after what had seemed an interminable exchange of secrets, she had lowered her head, averted her face, and hastened on to the dunes.

There, oddly enough, she had eaten up the whole of her tea at least half an hour before its usual time. A most

curious thing—that just that first look from a stranger should have given her an appetite like a schoolgirl's at a birthday party, and that the next should have taken it almost completely away. For there had been a next. More than one. She simply couldn't help herself. The following afternoon she had no more been able to resist marching steadily along past the striped bathing-machines and the boats, with the sea-wash in her ears, and the marvellous vivacity of it all tingling her senses, and she herself openly bound—she didn't deny it—for that shallow bow-window and its occupant, than she could stop herself yawning when she was tired.

And the one gnawing anxiety that followed was not that she ever scanned that window in vain, but that nothing else ever happened at all. There the young man would be—not in the least *too* young, of course—with that marvellous quiet dark face of his which she knew now by heart if ever woman can, yet with precisely the same remote welcoming smile on its features. That; and nothing more.

As for herself—and Miss Curtis had never minded acknowledging this the least little bit—why should she? —the third time she *had*, quite definitely, smiled back. She had raised her square face—and she knew she wasn't so bad-looking—and welcoming, all-hospitable, had given him smile for smile, and so openly that if they had met in the street, it couldn't else but have resulted in his raising his hat! And he, not in the least shocked—she wasn't such an idiotic judge of character as all that—had simply smiled on; a smile not exactly wistful, not exactly melancholy or sad, but as if its owner were in search of something of which he was only vaguely aware.

But why vaguely? Why vaguely? If only Miss Curtis hadn't been a little short-sighted, or had had the courage

to wear *pince-nez*—which she did not consider suited her—she might have been able to explore that question more closely. All that she knew for certain was this, that day after day and *after* she had first smiled back, that dark pale handsome romantic face was always turned in her direction when she came stepping along the sandy esplanade, and that it always wore the same look of genuine expectation, if not exactly of increasing interest. Of all this she was sure. And it had almost in her own phrase worn the inside out of her—the joy and expectation and waiting and doubting and longing of the whole thing.

And what if it had? Wasn't every seaside resort frequented by dark piratical creatures, or fresh curly-haired fair ones, on the look-out for conquests? And much older ones, too; and much worse. But far from bothering about them, Miss Curtis had never paid any more attention to the species than she had to the Dad-and-Mum-and-three-little-nippers kind of tripper at Easter or in August, or to the let-the-world-go-by young lovers on the beach. This young man at the window hadn't the faintest resemblance to such buccaneers. Obviously he wasn't even a visitor. He didn't even wear clothes different from the clothes you wear in London; just dark blue or dark grey, so far as she could see, and always, unless her short sight misled her, as nicely finished off as if he had just left the hands of a valet.

At first her heart had sunk at the thought that he was perhaps a 'resident'. Residents of course never take the smallest notice of mere visitors. Far from it. Except on Sundays at church-time or when they go shopping they don't even appear on the esplanade, and if they do, they take good care to show that they are used to it and not much enjoying it. Why merely living at the seaside should make you so haughty and exclusive Miss Curtis

had never troubled to consider. Besides, this young man at the window—he must be a *little* under thirty, she supposed—wasn't haughty and he was obviously not absolutely exclusive. Perhaps then he couldn't be a resident. But if he were neither a resident nor a visitor, what on earth could he be? And if he was a resident would he ever come out?

While Miss Curtis was only at Chapter XXI of *Hearts Aflame* she had ventured on in speculation even as far as that. And it was not because of any—well, whatever you like to call it—but because she couldn't be quite certain what the smile meant, that she hadn't quite consciously ventured further yet. Worse, she had begun to realize that though still far-away, his was a smile neither serene nor happy but a little pathetic. It was the smile of someone who is in search of something. What? Understanding? Companionship? Sympathy? Miss Curtis simply didn't know. And if it was any of these things, what ought she to do? If only—not the sexes themselves—but the conduct of the sexes could be sometimes reversed! Without any fatal results. If only she could have marched up to the door, knocked, asked for him and said, 'Well, here I am, you see. You want me? I have come. What can I do? Positively anything you ask of me me.' A smile can sink as deep into one's innermost consciousness as that!

Miss Curtis, who was at this moment quite alone—for Miss Mavor was now putting on her things—as she gazed on vacantly out into the London Street, all its sunset colours now faded, didn't care a jot now *what* he had wanted. The only thing that mattered was that he hadn't wanted her. Not that she bore him any ill-will on that score. Not only would she never see him again; she

would never see his like again. On his account she had given up all interest in men absolutely and for ever. Her every faculty was now centred on the practical—on her 'career'. The only male creature she still had any interest in was a nephew and she was going to leave him all her savings. Besides, look at that flossy little fly-away Phyllis and the dark secretive Miss Mavor and the rest. What a stupid waste, when every hour even of their working day was merely a wait between the acts of some silly love affair. The 'Pictures', a joy-ride, *some* young man always sapping their efficiency.

Miss Curtis's affair would never have been a mere love affair; it would have been a life affair. She knew that, at any rate. She knew perfectly well that if that smiling one at the window had suggested—quite simply even at their first meeting—that he wanted her to spend the rest of her life in his service, she wouldn't have hesitated. She knew that if for some reason best known to himself, he had merely nodded his head at her, to let her know that only her dead body washed up from out of the sea next morning would be of any use to him, in she'd have gone.

That would have been a funny eventuality if you like. But are eventualities that don't occur of the slightest importance? No smile now would ever bring Miss Curtis's sound healthy body to any such pass as that. Old age might, but so far as she knew she was not intolerably terrified at the thought that her sea might then be a trifle cold. Even the fact that five years ago she was already tending towards the spinsterish hadn't seemed to matter in the least. It made the shock when it came the more amusing to recall. It was almost her last little lesson, so to speak, on the brink. That thermos flask of tea, for example—and what an indescribable flavour it always had, like tepid metal, and those damp raspberry-jam sand-

wiches! In a moment of weakness she had owned that raspberry jam was her favourite of all jams, and her landlady had remembered it!

Anyhow, no one really young and silly and gullible and romantic would have taken *food* on such an expedition. It was not as though the face at the window would share it. She knew perfectly well that it was for her own sustenance alone—though it had quickly ceased to be. In fact the flavour of raspberry jam even as a memory was slightly indigestible. Miss Curtis was sorry her inside could betray her like that. Sitting among the sand-dunes with the long grey-green nodding grasses, the faint winds stirring their surface under those sunny heavens, and the bright platter of the empty sea—that would only have been pleasanter and pleasanter to remember. But not so the raspberry jam!

And now, in memory, Miss Curtis had come out of the glass and cast-iron shelter to which her feverish excitement had consigned her. It had been for only a very few minutes—to quiet down. With a glance at its one other occupant, an old gentleman, of whose countenance —since he was muffled up to the eyes in shawls—nothing was visible except spectacles, she had set out once more. It had been her new rule to keep her eyes fixed firmly on the barometer under the flagstaff on the front until she was nearly opposite the balcony, and then to cast only one firm straight intent glance up at the window, before —and this was the most horrible abyss to remember— before sitting down on a neighbouring seat, a few yards further on. Yes, she could be frank with herself about even that now. She had accustomed herself to sit down there *in wait* for him. She had definitely broken herself in to that, and solely with the intention of lying in wait

for him. Of lying in wait for him—like other women. Her one scrap of redeeming decency being that once she was seated she never by a fraction of an inch turned her head. Indeed sitting there—horribly stiff and hot and self-conscious—she *might* be out of sight of him—unless of course, he changed his position at the window to look. And wasn't that perhaps the least one could expect—when at any rate one had oneself sunk so low? It was on this afternoon however she was to learn that it is actually possible in this world to sink as low as that, and nobody, no human being anyhow, be a penny the richer. While you yourself might remain—well, what? Indescribably poorer? Just because you have been humbled to the dust? Because you've been taught your lesson? Had there been *need* to learn *that*? And supposing it had not been a lesson—a holiday task?

A slow smile had stolen into Miss Curtis's face—not sour but extraordinarily resolute, even a little grim. But never mind all that. It was the *last* afternoon of her degradation she was now thinking of. Questions were useless now.

She had found him there at his window just as usual, just as immobile, and almost excruciatingly alone, as if simply stricken with solitude. Smiling, oh yes; but—she hadn't any doubt of it now—*un*happy. It was absurd to deny it any longer. He was alone, he was desperate, he needed help. At this it seemed that an emotion of infinite understanding, of selfless abandonment, had swamped over her. She didn't even smile back *that* afternoon. She only looked. But with all her self—mind, heart, and soul and all these thirty years of long waiting—welling over in her eyes. It was no good mincing matters. She had felt like that: just swamped—like

some clumsily-handled Sunday tripper's rowing-boat that has landed wrong side on on the beach with a smart sea running. Every drop of blood in her body seemed at that moment to have come to a standstill. Then the gulp, the clutch at her bag, and she had sat down.

She had sat down, her back to the high pleasant house behind her and a few paces to her left, with its late Georgian greenish balconies. And there she had simply waited on and on and on. She had to do so; there was no help for it; to-morrow—or the next day—she must be going back. She couldn't blue all her savings, not to the very last stiver. Why then he must realize it; his very intelligence would reveal it if only she gave him time. She would wait, and he would declare himself. To ignore her now! With a face like that, a smile so unmotived, so wistful! Perfidy like *that* was not possible even in this perfidious world. The bottom of things didn't come out quite like that.

So she had sat on and on, only once stepping on, say fifty yards or so, very very slowly, her eyes on the sea, and then returning—without so much as an eyelash lifted towards the window. And as she sat down there the second time—her heart grown a little cold, her mind miserable with wrangling voices, there had presented itself in the skies opposite to her the most astonishing sunset she had ever seen.

It appeared as if the clouds must have been waiting in the wings all day for this last huge transformation scene. They were journeying, rank on rank, each to its appointed place, not only drenching heaven and earth with an enormous pomp of colour, but widening, shallowing, patterning the whole western horizon and even the zenith arched over her simple head. It was an amazingly joyful spectacle. One could hardly believe that again and again and

again throughout the centuries of the earth's solitary and peopled existence just such vast preparations as these must often have been made before—as if for the entry of some all-powerful and all-merciful potentate. Yet one who never actually appeared. And it didn't occur to Miss Curtis that, strictly speaking, the immense scene she was contemplating was hers alone; that every instant it was beginning a little further westward to some other spectator; indeed—sobering thought—that sunset was *always* going on for someone; and daybreak too, for that matter.

For herself that evening the two extremes seemed to have combined into one. And then, night. During those last brief minutes she had realized as she watched what it is to be in the presence of a life of infinite possibilities, crammed, brimmed with joys and anguish and responsibilities and delights that no foresight could apprehend. She was to realize too at the end of those few minutes what it is—so far as she was concerned—to see it instantaneously fade away and die, while still these lovely apparitions of the heavens burned on, in their turn too to fade away. For this life of which she had caught this marvellous glimpse had itself never even been a possibility—merely an illusion. Worse, a delusion.

Miss Curtis was not smiling now as she stood looking out into the street. Her face had never worn an expression so assured and resolute and indomitable. What a solace is a career, what a never-wearisome refuge plenty to do! How wise, how sagacious to retire and just look on. At least so it seemed *now*.

At Newhampton that evening an awful moment had intervened, a moment almost appallingly ridiculous to recall. For you can't actually remember racking pain of

mind and spirit any more than you can remember bodily agony. Voices had sounded out behind her as she sat with her little bag clutched in her tailor-made lap, her whole person positively blazing with the preternatural dyes of the west. And one of those voices she was to remember—it had sounded familiar too, though she had never heard it before—to her dying day. It was the voice of the Destroyer.

The esplanade at this moment had been all but deserted—empty. Two men—and as if a tocsin had proclaimed him she *knew* who one of them was—two men had come straight across from the house behind her, had passed the seat on her left about twenty yards away, had then turned right, and now were but a pace or two distant. She positively saw all this, as if she had eyes between her shoulder-blades. And she had sat on, motionless, half-suffocated with suspense, unable for an instant to stir hand or foot.

Then, with that vast western light for help, she had looked up—straight into the unknown one's face, straight into his eyes. And though they were fixed in her direction they had made no sign. None—just none. How could they? For though they were wide open they were veiled by a peculiar film, and even if the unknown one's hand had not been resting on his companion's arm, she would have realized at once that he was blind—just blind.

It was curious, perhaps, that being so, he could be capable—as that curiously vague gentle smile seemed to testify—of enjoying this spectacle of light and colour and refulgence, of sea, air, and sky. But Miss Curtis had never thought it curious. She had first heard only the voice, without catching the words, and then had gulped down the heart that had come into her mouth, and had so clum-

sily clutched at the wrong end of her bag that her thermos flask had slipped out of it, had rolled with extraordinary animation out of her lap and fallen with an incredible crash on to the asphalt beneath.

'What's that, what's that?' the voice had cried out, and a panic-stricken expression had transfigured the mute pale face.

'It's all right,' the other replied. 'It's only a lady who has dropped something.' And then as if in confidence: 'As a matter of fact, a bottle of tea, poor thing.'

The last words had been scarcely more than muttered. But in moments of extreme torture the senses may be exceedingly acute and the whole soul observant. They had remained fixed in Miss Curtis's mind as finally as if they had been recorded in wax for the gramophone. But since something that seemed very much like her whole life, her whole being, her very heart itself had at this moment been shattered into bits, it wasn't till some little time after, when the deeper wounds were numbing, that she felt the full destructiveness of that 'poor thing'. To see ourselves as others see us and not through the distortion of self-deception, rapture, and romance—'Poor thing!'—in the very words with which she herself had sometimes compassionated in silence some blowsy bedraggled tripper—or worse! 'And so—*ad infinitum*.' *That*, anyhow, only amused her now.

And that had been the end of it. Miss Curtis had stooped—the blood rushing to her head and staining her vision as she did so—and had picked up her broken flask. It looked a little disgusting but she had stuffed it back into her bag with her raspberry-jam sandwiches and her bun. Then she had swept her hands down over her lap almost as if she had finished a most delicious tea and wanted to get rid of the crumbs. And then she had got

up and gone off on her picnic to the sand-dunes. And then. . . .

But now Miss Mavor, having finished her last few little jobs—and all lip-sticked and freshly powdered for the evening—was ready to go. Miss Curtis herself pulled down the last dark-blue blind, the blind that covered the glass of the door. And she herself turned the handle and opened that door.

'Good-night, Miss Curtis,' said Miss Mavor.

'Good-night,' said Miss Curtis; then turned back into the vacant and half-lighted shop to get her own neat hand-bag and admirable umbrella, and to put on her hat and coat.

AN IDEAL CRAFTSMAN

Away into secrecy frisked a pampered mouse. A scuffling of bed-clothes, the squeak of a dry castor followed, and then suddenly the boy sat up and set to piecing together reality with scraps of terrifying but half-forgotten dreams.

It was his ears had summoned him, they were still ringing with an obscure message, a faint *Qui vive?* But as he sat blinking and listening in the empty dark he could not satisfy himself what sound it was that had actually wakened him. Was it only a dying howl from out of one of his usual nightmares, or had some actual noise or cry sounded up from the vacancy of the house beneath? It was this uncertainty—as if his brain were a piece of mechanism wound up by sleep—that set working a vivid panorama of memories in the little theatre of his mind—cloaked men huddled together in some dark corner of the night, scoundrels plotting in the wind, the pause between rifle-click and the loose fall, finally to culminate in the adventure of glorious memory—raiding Jacobs.

He groped under his pillow for the treasures he had concealed there before blowing out his candle—a box of matches, a crumbling slice of pie-crust, and a dingy volume of the Newgate Calendar. The last usually lay behind the draughty chimney of his fireplace, because Jacobs had the habits of a ferret and nothing was safe from his nosings. He struck a match soundlessly on the edge of his

mattress. Its flare lit up his lank-haired head, his sharp face and dazzled eyes. Then the flame drooped, went out. But he had had time to find the broad glossy belt he had cut out of a strip of mottled American cloth and the old sheathed poniard which he had months ago abstracted from his father's study. He buckled on the belt round his body in the dark over his night-shirt and dangled the rusty blood- (or water-) stained poniard coldly on his hip. He pulled on his stockings, tilted an old yachting cap over his eyes, and was fully equipped.

In this feverish haste he had had little time to ponder strategy. But now he sat down again on the edge of his bed, and though he was pretending to think, his brows wrinkled in a frown, he was actually listening. Even the stairs had ceased to creak. And the star that from a wraith of cloud glittered coldly in the night-sky beyond the rift between his curtains made no sound. He drew open his door, inch by inch, still intent, then stepped out on to the landing.

The first danger to be encountered on the staircase below was his father's bedroom. Its door gaped half-open, but was it empty? It was here on this very spot, he remembered with a qualm, that Jacobs had once leapt out on him. He saw in memory that agile shape stepping hastily and oddly in the dusk, furious at sight of the eavesdropper. And in an instant the tiny blue bead of gas on the landing had expanded into a white fan-shaped glare. Not so to-night. With a gasp and an oblique glance at the dusky bed and the spectral pendent clothes within, he slid by in safety on his stockinged feet, and so past yet another door—but this one tight shut, with its flower-painted panels—the door of his mother's gay little sitting-room, his real mother's, not the powdery eyebrowed

stepmother who a few hours before had set out with his father, on pleasure bent.

A few paces beyond he trod even more cautiously, for here was a loose board. At the last loop of the staircase Jacobs' customary humming should issue up out of the gloom beneath—the faint tune which he rasped on and on and on, faint and shrill between his teeth, superciliously, ironically, in greasy good-humour or sly facetiousness—he would hum it in his coffin perhaps. But no, not a sound. The raider hesitated. What next? Where now? He listened in vain.

And then, he suddenly remembered that this was 'silver' night. And doubtless—cook and housemaid long since snoring in their attic—a white glittering array of forks and spoons, soup ladles, and candlesticks were at this very moment spread out in bedaubed splendour before the aproned tyrant. For Jacobs was not only queer in his habits and nocturnal by nature but a glutton for work. But if it was silver night, why this prodigious hush? No clang of fork ringing against its neighbour; not a single rattle of whitening brush on metal reached his ears.

Slim as a ferret himself, he hung over the loop in the staircase as he might have hung over the Valley of Death; but still all was strangely quiet. And so, with a pang of disappointment, and at the same moment with a crow of relief, the boy came to the conclusion that Jacobs was out. And not for the first time either. He must have had a visitor—the woman in the black bonnet, with the silver locket dangling on her front, perhaps. As likely as not they had gone off gallivanting together, and would re-appear about eleven o'clock, Jacobs either swearing and quarrelsome or amiably garrulous.

But the boy was no fool. In spite of this sinister hush

in the house—as if its walls were draped with the very darkness of night—Jacobs *might* perhaps be busy over his silver. Shammy, however hard you rub with it, makes little sound. And if he were, then too much confidence would mean not only a sudden pursuit, a heart-daunting scuttle up the stairs, and Jacobs with his cane cutting at his legs from behind, but the failure of his raid altogether. Nothing then but a bit of stale pie-crust for his midnight feast. So he trod on velvet down the stairs, his damp palm shunning the banister (*that* squeak would wake an army!), his lips dry and his tongue rolling in luxury of anticipation. And soon he was in the hall, with all the empty rooms of the house above his head, and minified in his own imagination to a mere atom of whiteness in the dusk, a mouse within smell of the cat. His rusty poniard clutched tight between his fingers, his stomach full of fear and his heart noisy as a cock-crow, he pushed on.

The staircase ran widely and shallowly into the hall; there was more light here, a thin faint glow of gas-light, turned low. He could distinguish the dark shapes of the heavy furniture, as he stalked on through this luminous twilight. But the back passage to the kitchen quarters was hidden from elegant visitors by a muffled door with a spring, which Jacobs, when it suited him, kept propped wide open. This passage, if followed to the end, turned abruptly at right angles; and at the inner angle near the fusty entry to the cellars he paused to breathe and then to listen again. Once round the corner, along the passage in front of him the kitchen door would come into view, ajar or wide open, on the right; and the larder itself a few paces further on, and exactly opposite the raider. But before reaching it, the boot cupboard, sour den of long-legged spiders and worse abominations, must be

passed, and the window with the panes of coloured glass, looking out on a monstrous red, yellow, or blue garden of trees and stars.

The boy's lean dark face had in his progress become paler and leaner. His legs were now the skinny playthings of autumnal draughts, and at this moment a sound *had* actually reached his ears—the sound as of a lion panting over a meal. A sort of persistent half-choked snuffling. This was odd. This was surprising. Even when, with sleeves turned up and sharp elbows bared, Jacobs was engrossed in any job, he never breathed like that. In general, indeed, he scarcely seemed to be breathing at all; when for example, he stooped down close handing a dish of cabbage or blancmange at the Sunday dinner table of a taciturn father. *This* breathing was husky and unequal, almost like a snore through nostrils and mouth. Jacobs must be drunk, then; and that would mean either a sort of morose good-humour, or a sullen, drowsy malice, as dangerous as it was sly. The adventure was losing its edge. Even the hunger for romance in the boy's Scots-French blood died down within him at recollection of the dull, dull-lidded eyes of Jacobs half drunk.

There came a sudden *crkkk* and the squeak as of a boot. The boy bit hard on his lip. Yet another slow sliding step forward; the kitchen door *was* ajar. A spear of yellow light warned the intruder. But light—spear or no spear—was as vitalizing as a sip of wine. Red-capped, pock-marked faces, all sorts and conditions of criminals, buccaneers and highwaymen, gore and glory, flocked back again into the boy's fancy. An icy delicious shiver ran down his spine, for now Jacobs, tied with a tape round the middle, in his green baize apron, must be sitting at not much more than arm's length from the door. Or if not, who?

Inch by inch, courage restored, he slid on soundlessly, his stockinged foot first pushing forward into the light, then the white edge of his night-shirt. He pressed skin-close to the further side of the passage, and was actually half past the door ajar, when through a narrow chink he glanced into the kitchen, and so—suddenly found himself squinting full into the eyes of the fat woman in the black bonnet. Crouching a little, stiff and motionless, her eyes bolting out of her face, she stood there full in the light of the gas jet over her head, the faded brown hair that showed beneath her bonnet wreathing it as if with a nimbus. The boy stood frozen.

Not for an instant did he imagine he could be invisible to such a stare as that, to eyes which, though they were small and dark showed as round and shining as the silver locket that rose and fell jerkily upon her chest. His mouth opened—mute as a fish; every sinew in his body stiffened in readiness for flight. But the woman never so much as stirred. Every fibre and muscle in *her* body was at stretch to aid her ears. It looked as if she might be able to hear even his thoughts moving. So would a she-wolf stand at gaze under a white moon, with those unstirring eyes; famished and gaunt. And yet, what in the world was there for *her* to be afraid of? If anybody else was there she would have spoken. She was alone, then? His fingers suddenly relaxed, the scabbard of his poniard rattled against the wall behind him, and there slipped off his tongue the most unlikely question that would ever else have come into his mind. 'I say; where's Jacobs?'

The lids over the little black eyes fluttered and the woman's lips opened in a squawk. Her two rough red hands were suddenly clapped on either side of her mouth. For a moment he thought she was going to

scream again, and was thankful when only a shuddering sob followed. 'Oh, sir, how you did startle me. Mr. Jacobs, sir, why just as you was coming—he's gone, sir; he's gone.'

The boy pushed open the door and stood on the threshold. He had supposed it impossible that so stout a woman could speak in so small a voice. Sheer curiosity had banished all alarm. Besides, if Jacobs was out, there was no immediate danger. He looked about him, conscious that he was being closely watched from between those square red fingers, and that the forehead above them was deeply wrinkled, almost as if the woman were helpless with laughter.

'Why, lor,' she was muttering as if to herself, 'it's only the little boy. My! I thought he was his pa, I did; God bless him. He's come down for a drink of water. That's what he wants. And all in his pretty night-gown too.'

Tears were now gushing down her round cheeks and gurgling in her voice. She walked in angles to a chair and sat there rocking her body to and fro and smiling at him—an odd contorted smile of blandishment and stupidity sicklied over with fear. He blushed, and stared back at her as hot and angry as when in days gone by bent-up wrinkled old ladies used to stop his nurse in the street to ask questions about him, and had even openly kissed him.

This end to his adventure, which seemed to be leading him into difficulties he had never dreamed of, was a bitter disappointment. A drink of water! He resented the presence of this fat woman in the kitchen. He resented even more his own embarrassment. He wriggled under his night-shirt, and was profoundly relieved when those flabby florid cheeks suddenly faded to a mottled mauve, the rocking ceased, and two heavy eyelids slowly de-

scended upon the small black terrified eyes. Even if she *were* going to faint, she would at any rate have to stop staring.

But his troubles were only begun; ugly grunts were proceeding from that open mouth, and the woman's head was twitching oddly. Still, he had had experiences of this kind before. He knew what was to be done, and a scientific callousness gave his remedy zest. On the kitchen table beside some empty bottles of beer and a decanter stood a tumbler half full of water. This he liberally sprinkled on the woman's face and trickled a few drops, not without waste, between her teeth. Grunts expostulated, and the silver locket almost danced. She was coming to. Success stimulated him to fresh efforts; he snatched a scrap of brown paper from among the spoons and climbing up on to a chair lit it at the gas, and thrust it under her nose. It was enough. Such a smother would have stupefied an apiary.

But though the cure was now complete, and worthy of being proudly recorded, one pretty keepsake had been degraded for ever—the memory of his mother, lying on a sofa, and two blue eyes like dawn shining up amid the dew-drops sprinkling her fair cheeks. This fat stranger's petticoat was of coarse red dingy flannel. She was clammy and stupid and ridiculous. Nevertheless, the absurd fear of him or whatever it might be that had brought her to this pass seemed for the moment to be clean forgotten. For when her dazed eyes rolled down from under their lids again and looked out at him, precisely the same expression had come into her face as he had seen on it when he had watched her smiling mawkishly at Jacobs himself.

'Are you better now?' he asked coldly, flourishing the smouldering paper.

The woman smiled again, and nodded.

'I'm afraid I may have burnt you. But there's no other way, you see, though the smell's pretty beastly.' The woman went on vacantly smiling. Not that this stupid wrinkling up of her mouth and cheeks seemed to mean anything. She might have been made of wax. Further parleying, he decided, would be wasted.

'You needn't mention it to Jacobs, you know,' he began. '*I* shan't say anything. You see, I just happened to notice you through the door. I think I'll be going back now. Jacobs is a bit of a . . .' Nothing very conciliatory could come after that 'bit'. At all events he decided to keep back the word that had so nearly slipped out. The silver locket began to jolt again, and clumsy fingers fumbled at it. The smile was beginning to crystallize into the familiar wrinkled stare.

'You *look* better, *much* better,' said the boy uneasily, edging towards the door. 'I remember once my mother . . .' But his tongue refused for shame to say what he remembered. Also he found it difficult to turn his back on the woman, though when at last he reached the door he whipped round quickly.

'Little boy,' called the woman in a fulsome voice, 'come back! I say!—little *boy*!'

He frowned. Her eyes were now searching his face intently and suspiciously. She had begun to think again. And at sight of their hostility his own underlip drooped into a sullen obstinacy. He didn't mind *her*. If she decided to sneak to Jacobs, that was her look out: meanwhile he could easily manage her alone.

'What?' he said.

'I was took ill, wasn't I? The heat's something awful. *Phh!* But there isn't any need to stare, little boy. I shan't eat you.' Cunning peeped out of the unctuous face,

and he merely waited for the trap. 'Not me; and what a pretty belt he's got on,' she continued, rolling her dingy handkerchief into a ball; 'and ain't he got a nice new dagger!'

But even such flatteries as these produced no response. The dagger wasn't new, and the belt was not meant to be pretty. 'I must be going now, thank you,' he repeated. 'Besides, I suppose he'll be back in a minute?'

Her hands stayed motionless, her head had suddenly jerked a little sideways like a thrush's intent on the stirrings of a worm.

'Going,' she repeated; 'why, of course, he must be going, poor lamb: he'll get his death of cold. And wasn't he *good* to me; *good* to me he was. And that clever! You'd have thought he was a doctor!'

Her glance meanwhile was roving in confusion into every corner of the room as though she were looking for something, and was afraid of what she might find. He could hardly keep his own from following them. 'That kind and gentle he was! Just like a doctor he was!' And again a menacing silence swallowed up her words. The boy's face reflected a distrust deepening into hostility. Was the whole thing a cheat then? Was Jacobs as usual playing the sneak? Would he suddenly leap out on him? In any case he knew he was only being cajoled, if not ridiculed.

'There, now!' she suddenly broke out, 'if he isn't *thinking* again. That's what he's doing. He's thinking about what I was saying to meself when that funny dream came over me. That's what he's doing. And why not, I should like to know. Eh?' She shot him a searching, ogling glance.

'I didn't notice,' he answered. 'Your *eyes* looked rather queer, with the whites gone up, and your skin

twitched just as if the water burnt it. But *I* didn't mind.'

'How long was you there, then? Tell me that?' Her nails were now gripped uncomfortably sharp on his arm. 'You stand there frowning and sulking, my young soldier. And by what rights, may I ask? Just you tell me how long you was there!' Her face had grown hard and dangerous, but he shut his mouth tight and returned sullenly stare for stare. 'So help me,' she half whispered, releasing him, 'now I've been and frightened him again. That's it. He thinks I'm angry with him. Lord love you, my precious, I didn't mean anything like that. Not me. P'raps you just came down for a bit of fun, eh?'

She fixed her eyes on the dagger, and shuddered. 'What was I saying? Ah, yes. How long—*how long* was —you—there?' She stamped her foot. 'That's right, saucer-eyes, stare, stare! Didn't I *say* I'm old and ugly! Ain't *he* said it too? Oh, oh, oh! What shall I do, what shall I do?' She hid her face in her hands and her tears gushed out anew.

The boy stood stiffly at her side. This unexpected capitulation unnerved him, and his heart began to heave menacingly.

'I'm sorry; but I must go now,' he repeated, trying with as little obvious aversion as possible to drag his hand from her hot wet cheek. 'And I don't see what good crying will do.' As if by magic the snuffling ceased.

'Good! Who said, what good? It's *me* who must be going, my young man, and don't you make any mistake about *that*!' She shook out her skirts, and searched in vain for the bonnet on her head. He nearly laughed out, so absurd was the attempt—for the bunched-up old thing was dangling by its strings behind her back. But this retrieved, she drew it on, pushing under it wisps of her

iron-grey hair. Then she opened a fat leather purse, stuffed with keys and dirty crumpled papers.

'Now what have I got here?' she began wheedlingly, as she pushed about with her finger and took out a sixpence. 'What have I got here? Why, a silver sixpence. And who's that for? Why, for any nice little boy what won't spy and pry. That's what that's for.' She stooped nearly double, holding it out to him with bolting eyes in her purpled face. 'What? He won't take it? Shakes his head? Too proud to take it. Oh, very well, very well.'

She opened her purse again and with shaking fingers pushed the sixpence back. She was not crying now, but her face had gone a deathly grey, and a blank, dreadful misery had crept into it. This woman was a very strange woman. He had never met anyone who behaved in such a queer way. He watched her as she went waddling off out of the kitchen and over the stone floor into the darkness beyond. Her footsteps ceased to sound. She was gone, then? And she must have left the garden door open behind her; the wind was bellying in his nightshirt and icy under his arms. Here was the cat come in, too, rolling in its sodden fur on the oilcloth at his feet. 'Puss, Puss,' he said. Where had *he* been to get in such a state? The boy stood dismayed and discomfited, while the cat rubbed its body and its purring jaws against his stockinged legs.

A stark unstirring silence had spread into the kitchen, though the gas was faintly singing—high and from very far away. And, as if to attract his attention, a wisp of hair was patting his forehead under his ridiculous cap-brim. The silence entangled his thoughts in a medley of absurd misgivings productive only of chicken-skin and perplexity. Something had gone wrong—the house was changed; and he didn't know how or why. He glanced

up at the clock, which thereupon at once began to tick. His eyes dodged from side to side of the familiar kitchen and then it was as if a stealthy warning finger had been laid upon his thoughts, and chaos became unity.

His roving glance had fallen on the cupboard door. For there in the crack at the bottom of it, shut in and moving softly in the wind, showed a corner of green baize. Jacobs was there, then; bunched up there, then; smiling to himself and waiting and listening in there, then? The boy stood appalled, his bright black eyes fixed on this flapping scrap of green baize apron. The whole thing *was* a trap! And yet, as he tried hard to keep his wits, he had known instantly there was something wrong—something he couldn't understand. That was just like one of Jacobs' jokes!—jokes that usually had so violent and humourless an ending. And yet . . . Suddenly the hinges of the outer door had whinnied; he jerked round his head in alarm. It was the woman again. She had come back. Bead-bright raindrops glittered on the black of her jacket, on her bonnet, in her hair. That rigid awful stare of horror had come back into her face. He could move neither hand nor foot; could only stare at her.

'Eh, eh, now!' she was choking out at him. 'So you've *seen* now, my fine young gentleman, have you? That's what you've done. Then what do *I* say; *me*! Keep a civil tongue in your head, that's what *I* say. And tell me this——' The face thrust so close down to his had grown enormous and unspeakably dreadful. Her hot breath enveloped him. 'Where's the gate? Where's the gate, I say? I got lost there among them bushes. I can't get out. D'ye see? I've lost the gate. It's dark. It's come on raining. Where's the *gate*?'

Tiny beads of blood stood on her skin—she must have

stumbled into the holly hedge at the foot of the garden by the cucumber frames. She smelt not only of her old clothes but of the night and the rain. And still he made no answer. He had been driven back by that awful and congealed look on her face—beyond fear. He was merely waiting—to find *his* way: this mystery, this horror.

'Eh, now;' she had turned away, her heavy head crooked down over one shoulder, and was speaking this time to herself: 'quiet and silly, that's what *he* is. Nothing much anybody could get out of *him*. But see you here!' She had twisted round. 'It's no good you playing the young innocent with me. You've seen and you know. That's what you've done. And you just tell me this. How *could* I have done it? how *should* I have done it? That's what I'm asking. Just you tell me that. Haven't I come of honest people? And didn't he promise me and promise me? And nothing but lies. And then, "You ain't the first," he says. And me as I am! "You ain't the first," he says. Ay, and meant it. "What, what!" I says. And then he hit me—here, with his clenched up fist, *here*. "I shan't leave you," I said, "and you can't make me." And all I wanted was just to keep body and soul together. "And you can't make me," that's what I said. "That's all," I said. And then he laughed. "You ain't the first," he says, laughing. And me as I am! . . . Oh, my God, he *won't* understand. Listen, little boy. I didn't know what I was doing; everything went black and I couldn't see. And I put out my hands—to push him off, and my fingers went stiff and a smudge of red came over my eyes, and next thing he fell down like a bundle, and wouldn't speak, wouldn't speak. Mind you, I say *this*, if I hadn't drunk the beer, if I hadn't drunk the beer, if I hadn't—done—that . . .' She faltered, her face went blank as she swayed.

Her listener was struggling hard to understand. These broken words told him little that was clear and definite, and yet were brimming over with sinister incomprehensible meanings. He frowned at the contorted, dark-red moving face and loose lips. One fact and one fact alone was plain. He had nothing to fear from Jacobs. Jacobs was not going to pounce out on him. Simply because Jacobs was gone. Then why . . . ? He twisted about, and kneeling down on the floor by the cupboard beside the cooling kitchen range—with scarcely a glint of drowsy red now in its ashy coals—he struggled with the metal tongue that held back the door. Usually loose, it now turned stiffly and hurt his fingers. Then suddenly it gave way.

And the boy's first quick thought was: Why, he's quite a little man! And the next was one of supreme relief that all this wild meaningless talk was now over. He leaned forward and peered into the puckered-up clay-coloured face, with its blackened lips and leaden-lidded eyes. The chin was dinted in with the claw pin in the cravat. A gallipot stood near—a trap for crickets—touching one limp hand, still smeared with pink plate powder. The door-tongue was stiff, the boy supposed, because the corner of the baize apron had got stuck to the varnish of the frame. You'd have hardly thought, though, there'd be room in the cupboard. But the important thing, the illuminating, inspiring, and yet startlingly familiar thing was the gallipot!

It had touched a spring, it had released a shutter in his mind and set his thoughts winging back to a sooty, draughty chimney where only a few minutes ago—minutes as vast and dark and empty as the sea—he had hidden a book with a wedge of piecrust on top of it. In that book he had read of just such a gallipot as this—but not

as a trap for crickets—a gallipot with a handful of spade guineas in it, which had belonged to an old man who had been brutally strangled in the small hours by his two nephews. They had never been caught either; nobody had even suspected them. They had planned a means of escape—so vile and fantastic that even to watch them at it had made his skin deliciously creep upon him and his hair stir on his head. But it had succeeded, it had *worked*. To the dead old man's four-poster bed they had strung up the body of their victim, and until one of them, on his death-bed, had made confession, the old man's bones had lain beneath the tramplings of the cross-roads. For everybody, even his own relatives, believed that he had hanged himself. This evilly romantic picture had flamed up with an ominous glow in the boy's imagination as he stood there contemplating his quiet enemy. The woman had become utterly unimportant. She was standing by the table, twisting, now up, now down, her dark-green bonnet-strings.

'How did you do it?' said the boy, looking up and leaning back with a shuddering sigh upon his heels. 'How on earth? Did he struggle? He couldn't have struggled *much*, I suppose. He's so small. He *looks* so small.'

The questions were unanswered and were unrepeated. He was merely drinking the scene in. That mole upon the bluish close-shaven cheek was certainly grown blacker than it had been in life, more conspicuous.

'But you aren't of course going to leave him like this?' he broke out sharply. 'You can't, you know; you simply can't.' But the woman was paying him no attention. 'Don't you *see*? They'd find it out in no time,' he added petulantly.

Yet even in the midst of this callous analysis, the

woman's child-like attitude attracted his sympathy. At sight of the mute, huddled contents of the cupboard, she seemed to have forgotten the danger she was in. A vacant immeasurable mournfulness quietened her face. She was crying. 'I'm sorry, but it's no good crying,' he went on, still kneeling on the cold oil-cloth. '*That* won't be of any help; and I'd be awfully pleased to help you all I *can*. As a matter of fact I didn't much care for old Jacobs myself. But then, he's dead now. He *is* dead?'

The woman smothered his momentary fear with an eye-shot of horror. 'Well, if he is, I can't see why you shouldn't say so.' She remained motionless. 'Oh, dear,' he muttered impatiently, 'don't you under*stand*? We *must* do *some*thing.' A heavy frown had settled under the streak of dark hair on his forehead. 'You wouldn't stand the ghost of a chance as it is. They'd catch you easy.'

The woman nodded. 'I don't care; I hope they will. I don't care *what* happens now—because I can't think.'

'That's all rot,' said the boy stoutly. 'You've got to.'

The woman was irritating and paradoxical in this mood, and more than ever like a senseless wax model, which, with diabolical tremors, moves its glazed eyes and turns a glossy head. He peered again into the cupboard. Only once before had he seen Jacobs asleep—stretched out on a sofa in the dining-room one sultry afternoon in the streaming sunshine—gaping, sonorous. Then he had gone out as he had come in, on tiptoe. Now he stooped a little closer towards the cupboard, examining what was in it, stretching out even an experimental finger towards the small pallid hand.

He compared the woman's face and this other face, and found a fancy strangely contradictory of the facts. Jacobs was really and truly the man of blood; Jacobs was just the kind of person you'd expect to be a mur-

derer. Not this woman, so fat and stupid. Nobody would be surprised to find *her* body in any cupboard. But Jacobs, small and ferrety, softly rasping his tune between his teeth, on and on! And now Jacobs was dead. So that's what *that* was like. He jerked his head aside, and his eyes became fixed once more on the gallipot. *That* was the real and eloquent thing. His mind had completed its circuit. He stood up convinced.

'It's no good going on like this,' he explained lucidly, almost cheerfully. 'This would be the very first place they would look into. I should look in here myself. But don't you see, you needn't be caught at all if you do what I tell you. It's something I read in a book of mine.'

The woman lifted a mechanical head and looked at him; and as if for the first time. She saw—a meagre boy with linnet legs and narrow shoulders, a lean clean-cut face of a rather bilious brown, and straight dark brown hair beneath a yachting cap; a boy in black stockings, a night-shirt and a shiny belt; his dark eyes, narrowed and intent, set steep in his head. This boy frightened her. She pushed on her bonnet and loosened her dress about her throat.

Manifestly she was preparing to go. He spoke more decisively. 'You don't *see*. That's all,' he said. 'Really, on my word of honour, it would be all right. I'm not just saying so. A baby could do it.'

The woman knelt down beside him in a posture not unlike the inmate's of the cupboard, and solemnly stared into his face. 'Tell me, tell me quick, you silly lamb. *What* did you say? A *baby* could do it?'

'Why, yes,' said the boy, outwardly cool, but inwardly ardent, 'it's as easy as A.B.C. You get a rope and make a noose, and you put it over his head and round his neck, you know, just as if he were going to be hanged.

And then you hang him up on a nail or something. He mustn't touch the ground, of course. You throttled him, didn't you? You see there's no blood. They'll say he hanged himself, don't you see? They'd find old Jacobs strung up in the kitchen here and they'll say he's hanged himself. Don't you *see?*' he repeated.

'Oh, I couldn't do it,' she whimpered, 'not for worlds. I couldn't. I'd sooner stay here beside him till they come.' She began to sob in a stupid vacant fashion, and then suddenly hiccuped.

'You could, I tell you. A baby could do it. You're afraid. That's what it is! I'm going to, I tell you, whether you like it or not.' He stamped his stockinged foot. 'Mind you, I'm not doing it for myself. It's nothing to do with me. You aren't taking the least trouble to understand.' He looked at her as if he couldn't believe any human being could by any possibility be so dense. 'It's just stupid,' he added over his shoulder, as he sallied out to the boot cupboard to fetch a rope.

Once more the tide of consciousness flowed in the woman's stolid, flattened brain. Two or three words of this young hero had at last fallen on good ground. And with consciousness, fear had come back. She came waddling after the boy. The vagrant crawling inmates of the cupboard had been swept carelessly from the corner, and now he was trailing a rope behind him as he went on into the larder for brandy. His match died down meanwhile, scorching his fingers, and he stayed on in the dark, the woman close behind him, rummaging gingerly among the bottles and dishes. And soon his finger-tips touched the sharp-cut stopper. He returned triumphant, flipping from them the custard they had encountered in their search. The woman followed close behind him, stumbling ever and again upon his trailing

rope, and thereby adding to her fears and docility. She was coming alive again. Brandy set her tongue gabbling faster. It gave the boy the strength and zeal of a stage villain.

He skipped hither and thither, now on to, now off the kitchen chair he had pushed nearer; then—having swept back the array of pink-smeared silver candlesticks and snuffers that were in his way, he scrambled up on to the table, and presently, after a few lassoo-like flings of it, he had run the rope and made it fast over one of a few large hooks that curved down from the ceiling, hooks once used, as Jacobs had told him, to hang up hams on. His mouth was set, his face intent; his soldier grandfather's lower lip drawn in under the upper. The more active he was the more completely he became master of the ceremonies, the woman only an insignificant accomplice, as stupid as she was irresponsible. Even while she helped him drag out the body from the cupboard on to the flat arena of oil-cloth, she continued to cry and snivel, as if *that* would be of any help. But a keen impassive will compelled her obedience. She followed the boy's every nod.

And presently she almost forgot the horror of the task, and found a partial oblivion in the intensity of it, though the boy was displeased by her maunderings. They were merely a doleful refrain to his troublesome grisly work. But he uttered no open reproof—not even when she buried her face in the baize apron and embraced the knees of the dead man. Only once she made any complaint against the limp heedless hung-up creature. 'If only,' she assured her young accomplice, 'if only he hadn't gone and *said* as how I wasn't the first. I ask you! As if I didn't know it.' But to this he paid no attention.

And now, at last, he drew back to view his handiwork. This he did with an inscrutable face, a face flattered at his own extraordinary ingenuity, a young face, almost angelic in its rapt gaslit look and yet one, maybe, of unsophisticated infamy. The dwarfish body seemed to be dangling naturally enough from its hook in the ceiling, its heels just free of the chair. And it did to some extent resemble the half-sinister, half-jocular cut that adorned his *Calendar*. Yet somehow he wasn't perfectly satisfied. Somehow the consummation was as yet incomplete. Some one thing was wanting, some blemish spoiled the effect and robbed it of unity. What? He stood hunting for it without success.

He followed the woman into the passage. She walked unsteadily, swaying bulkily to and fro, now and again violently colliding with the wall. 'Oh, it was crule, crule,' she was muttering.

After her stalked the boy, deep in thought. When she stopped, he stopped; when once more she set forward, as patiently he too set forward with her. Which of them was led, and which leader, it would be difficult to say. This dogged search after the one thing wanting continued to perplex and evade him. He decided that it was no good trying. It must be looked to when the woman was gone; when he was alone.

'I think you had better go now,' he said. 'He'll be coming home soon—my father, I mean, and . . . It's just ten to twelve by Jacobs' clock.' The words conjured up in his mind a vision of his handsome dressed-up stepmother, standing there in the kitchen doorway half-hysterical before her swaying manservant. It faintly, and even a little sadly, tickled his fancy.

He opened the front door. It was still raining, and

the smell of the damp earth and ivy leaves came washing into the house. The woman squatted down on the door-step. 'Where shall I go?' she said. 'Where shall I go? What's the use? There ain't *no*where.' The boy scowled at the dripping trees. The house was surrounded by night—empty and silent but for the smothering soft small whisper of the rain, and the flat *drip*, *drip* of the drops from the porch.

'What's the use? There ain't *no*where,' again wailed his poor bedraggled confederate. He scrutinized her scornfully from under his tilted yachting cap. 'Wait a minute,' he said. He raced at full speed up the three dark flights of stairs to his bedroom. The book, the mouse-nibbled piecrust were tossed on to the hearth-rug and a florin was dug out of the gritty soot. Down he came again pell-mell.

Like a cat venturing into a busy street, the woman now stood peering out from the last of the three shallow crescent-shaped stone steps under the porch. 'I've brought you this,' he said superciliously.

'Thank you, sir,' said the woman.

She paused yet again, looking at him, in an attitude now familiar to the boy—the fingers of her knuckled left hand, with its thick brassy wedding-ring, pressed closely against mouth and cheek. He wondered for a moment what she was thinking about, and he was still wondering when she stepped finally off out into the rain.

A shrill shout followed her. 'I say! mind that ditch there in the road!' But the only result of this was to bring the woman back again; she knelt and clasped him tightly to her bosom.

'I don't know why or anything. Oh, my lamb, my lamb, I didn't mean to do it and now I haven't got anywhere to go.' She bent low and hid her weeping face

on his shoulder. 'Oh, oh, I miss him so. The Lord God keep you safe! You've been very kind to me. But. . . .'

She released him, and waddled out once more under the flat-spread branches of the cedar tree, while the boy rubbed the smarting tears from his neck. He shut the door indignantly. This tame reaction was mawkish and silly. Then he paused, uncertain what to do next. And suddenly memory rendered up the one thing wanting—the master-touch.

Why, of course, of course! Jacobs must have kicked a chair down. You couldn't hang yourself like that without a drop. It was impossible. The boy's valour, after all, was only a little shaken by the embrace. Into the kitchen he walked victorious. The gas was still singing, as it had sung all the evening, shedding its dismal flaring light on wall and clock and blind and ceiling and wide array of glossy crockery. The puckered clay-coloured face looked stupidly at him with bolting, dull, dull-lidded eyes. What was now to be done must be done quickly. He ducked sharply and upset the chair—a little too sharply, for a light spring-side boot had tapped him on the cheek. He leapt back, hot and panting. The effect was masterly. It was a triumph. He stared, with clenched fists, and whispered over his shoulder to a now absent accomplice. He was alone! Only Jacobs was there—with that drowsy slit of eye—tremulously dangling. And as if, even for him, as if even for *his* clear bold young spirit this last repulsive spectacle were suddenly too much, the martial spirit of his ancestors within him wilted, surrendered, vanished, leaving behind it nothing but a small boy in his night-shirt—the timid half-stifled raider of Jacobs' pantry. The whisper in the dark outside of the uncertain wind, the soft bubbling whistle of the

gas, the thousand and one minute dumb things around him in the familiar kitchen—nothing had changed. Yet *now* every object had become suddenly stark, menacing, and hostile. Panic seized him. He ran out to the front door and bawled into the dark after the woman.

No answer came. The rain was falling softly on the sodden turf; and here, beneath the porch, in large ponderous drops. The widespread palms of the cedar tree under the clouded midnight lay prone and motionless. The whole world was gone out—black. Nothing, nothing; he was alone.

He ran back again into the house—as if he had been awakened out of a dream—leaving the door agape behind him, and whimpering 'Mother!' Then louder—louder. And all the blind things of the house took wooden voices. So up and down this white-shirted raider ran, his clumsy poniard clapping against sudden corners, his tongue calling in vain, and at last—as he went scuttling upstairs at sound of cab-horse and wheels upon the sodden gravel—falling dumb for very terror of its own noise.

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